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JAPANESE REGIONAL MASCOTS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF NOSTALGIA

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Regional mascots in Japan are utilized in several different ways from place branding, tourism marketing and business to administrative soft power functions. With the Japanese tourism industry relying heavily on domestic travel, regional mascots are parts of campaigns designed to market rural travel locations to domestic audiences. Predating the use of mascots, these campaigns have long marketed rural destinations as imagined homeplaces utilizing the culturally bound nostalgic imagery of hometown, *furusato*. The concept of homeplace is intimately connected to the locally observable phenomenon of indulgent interdependence in Japan, *amae.* This study aims to find nostalgic triggers identifiable in the framework of *furusato* and *amae* in regional mascots and their campaigns through qualitative representational analysis.

Nostalgia is conceptualized as an emotional response containing a mixture of positive and negative feelings for things no longer available. In addition to personal nostalgia, nostalgia can be experienced towards a collectively shared cultural past or a historical time, in which case the nostalgic experience is simulated. In advertising texts, nostalgic triggers provide a means for greater consumer involvement. In the Japanese cultural context, nostalgic experience is often connected to the sense of homelessness and yearning for homeplace. While personal nostalgia for *furusato* is possible, the majority of nostalgic experience can be categorized as collective or historical. Things like local specialty products, events and activities may serve as nostalgic triggers. *Amae* ties in with *furusato* through the collective nature of village life and interdependence, whereas cute culture connects with *amae* through feelings of comfort and indulgence. Character culture enables affective consumption and escape into simulated worlds.

The representation analysis utilized follows the constructionist approach to representation and meaning making, where reality is constituted from meaning making processes. This approach allows the search of denotative and connotative connections between mascot campaign content and *furusato* imagery.

The analysis focuses on four regional mascots and their campaigns. The material introduced includes design, promotional activities, products and content produced for the characters. Content analysed is multimodal including audiovisual material, websites, blogs and social media channels. The representations in the campaigns are found to constitute locations as imagined homeplaces and communities. Similarly, the analysis discovered possibilities for nostalgia through experiences of *amae.* Nostalgic triggers identified through the analysis evoke either personal, collective or historical nostalgia. Notions of tradition, home, childhood, nature, festival culture, cuisine and local specialties are identified as powerful nostalgic triggers in the Japanese cultural context. As the outcome of nostalgic feeling cannot be guaranteed, further study is recommended for the confirmation of the occurrence of nostalgic reactions to these triggers from a larger sample of material.

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1. Introduction

In today's Japan, mascots and cute characters are present in a myriad of industries and businesses as a part of their public image. Cuddly and cute characters have not only emerged as the consumerist ambassadors of businesses and commodities but also as figureheads and public mascots of regions and cities all over Japan. These regional mascots are usually referred to as *gotōchi-kyara* (ご当地キャラ) or *yuru-kyara* (ゆるキャラ), the former translating roughly as 'character of a region'[1]. *Yuru-kyara* on the other hand has a slightly more complex meaning, with notions of loose, lax, gentle, weak, and soft connected to the term's attributive word *yuru(i)*, creating an image of a defenseless, soft and cute character. The looseness of the image comes from many of the characters being designed and drawn in an amateur style and not being entirely groomed to perfection. According to Birkett, although the term *yuru-kyara* was copyrighted in 2004 by Jun Miura, characters serving the same purpose existed earlier as well and went by the name of image characters (2012, p. 58). Miura himself has defined the term with three conditions: a *yuru-kyara* should to carry a strong message about its home place which implies a love for said place, its movements should be unsteady and wobbly, and it should combine a certain looseness of character and lovableness (Oricon Style 2009).

The terms *yuru-kyara* and *gotōchi-kyara* can be defined in several different ways ranging from their outer qualities to the functions they serve and the cultural meanings they are imbued with. Regional mascots in Japan exist in the meeting point of popular culture, economy, marketing and the traditional Japanese culture. In terms of the economic situation, regional mascots are often connected to the revitalization efforts in the rural areas in Japan and place branding. Birkett, for example connects the characters and their creation to village revitalization efforts and the promotion of goods the particular area is attempting to brand itself with (2012, p. 57). As parts of place branding, the mascots are intended to be visual representations of the qualities of a specific place (ibid. p. 59). Although regional mascots are most often associated with the hospitality industry's marketing efforts, place branding efforts cover a more significant ground in terms of a place's image and identity. Due to their flexible nature mascots can also be utilized in several administrative functions and public relations inside their respective areas. In the golden era of social media, the mascots often have a strong social media presence which blurs the lines of their planned public relations campaigns. As the social media space is in constant flux and content is overflowing, reaction times to real life incidents grow shorter and

[1]All translations in this paper are my own if not otherwise indicated.

content creation becomes more spontaneous. The PR teams for mascots create a continuous flow of posts on multiple channels simultaneously while attempting to balance the ratio of fun and informational content. In fact, it would appear the PR teams value quantity over quality: image creation through social media often results in nonsensical and highly spontaneous multimedia content with the purpose of engaging with followers.

Creation of such an abundance of regional mascots is in itself a peculiar phenomenon meriting research. The trend has been nurtured into its present state by the unique cultural environment of Japan. One of the factors contributing to the scale of this phenomenon is the strength of the domestic tourism industry in Japan. According to the White Paper on Tourism in Japan, in 2018 the number of one-day trips made by Japanese domestic tourists amounted to 270,73 million while domestic overnight trips amounted to 291,05 million. Japanese overseas travel on the other hand, while increasing yearly only amounted to 18,95 million trips the same year. In yens, the respective numbers for consumption in 2018 amounted to 20,5 trillion yen in domestic travel as compared to the 1,1 trillion for overseas travel. (Japan Tourism Agency 2019, pp. 8-9) These numbers illustrate the strong preference on domestic traveling among the Japanese people. With the domestic hospitality industry crunching out similar numbers annually, the need for place branding and tourism marketing in order to stand out from the rest of the destinations is well grounded. Local destinations aspire to catch the browsing tourists' eye with more traditional campaigns and by advertising their respective localities with the assistance of regional mascots. The difficulty, though, lies in the similarity of domestic destinations and especially rural locations, with even the local specialty products being mostly similar to one another.

The means for standing out in the mascot crowd are rather limited in this situation. The main strategy seems to be designing the characters in a way that incorporates as many of the place's specialty products and points of attraction. Often the characters end up holding the place's most famous foodstuffs or cultural products or wearing the region's traditional clothing. Many of the characters actually even take the form of a foodstuff, a culturally important building or an animal intrinsic to the area. Characters and animals borrowed straight from folktales are also a familiar sight in the ranks of regional mascots. These kinds of attributes are embodied more or less successfully, and the attributes are sometimes blended together only to create nonsensical and at times even slightly disturbing combinations. In order to achieve desired visibility connected with their brand image, the prefectures or cities in possession of the mascot copyrights usually offer the mascot imagery and logos for free use.

The reason for characters being a popular means of advertising in Japan's hospitality industry draws from the area's culture. Regional mascots employ the trend of anthropomorphization,

which is more recently connected with the phenomenon of cute culture and *kawaii* (cute) aesthetics in Japan. The phenomenon itself is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, with the history of love for characters drawing on the long animist traditions and beliefs of shintoism (Occhi 2012, pp. 114-116). Love for characters predisposes the Japanese consumers to advertising based on cute figures for a number of reasons. Many scholars identify *kawaii* aesthetics and characters to be associated with notions like childhood, naivete, innocence, helplessness, girlishness, intimacy and healing *(iyashi)* (see for example Birkett 2012, Kinsella 1995, Occhi 2012, Yano 2011). Cuteness is also considered to be in a close relationship with the concept of *amae* (甘え), which is at times listed as a defining attribute of cuteness. *Amae* refers to a need for interdependence and indulgence, and is deeply ingrained in the Japanese culture and way of thinking and relating oneself to the world (Doi 2001). Likewise a relevant concept to this study is *furusato* (故郷), which together with *amae* can make a powerful combination for evoking nostalgia in Japanese people. *Furusato* literally stands for old village or home place, and is often pined after in popular songs, literature and poetry. Yearning for one's native place and for a simpler life in rural Japan has also been a powerful driver of domestic tourism in Japan in the past decades, and several tourism campaigns concentrated on marketing the idea of *furusato* have been hugely successful (see for example Creighton 1997, Robertson 1988 and 1994).

There is a definite bridge to be built between the nostalgia-filled campaigns and the regional branding of today. Are regional mascots attempting to cash in on the nostalgia-evoking imagery used by the tourism industry? The relevance of studying regional mascots from this perspective stems from the widespread utilization of cute characters in Japanese advertising: characters have clearly been identified as an effective means of getting messages of brand images across to the consumers. An argument for the attractiveness and effectiveness of cute figures in marketing overall can be made here, but regional branding differs a great deal from regular marketing of products. This setting begs the question of the suitability of cute characters to the place branding and location marketing function they have been employed in. By observing nostalgic themes in regional mascots, I hope to uncover the cultural context explaining their utilization in such a manner.

In this paper, I will examine the mascots used in regional branding in Japan through the concept of nostalgia. More specifically, I will investigate how nostalgic themes and attributes appropriate in the Japanese context are present in regional mascots that are utilized for public relations and marketing purposes in the domestic tourism and hospitality industries in Japan. I will conduct a qualitative, representational analysis of four selected regional mascots and their

public images and the campaigns built around them. The analysis will therefore include not only the mascots and their activities, but the imagery of the campaigns as well. The mascots have been selected based on good rankings in the annual Japanese character competition, Yuru-kyara Grand Prix. My hypothesis is that regional mascots rely on nostalgic themes and attributes in their points of appeal.

I will begin this study by introducing popular theories and relevant studies on nostalgia. After establishing the conceptual basis, I will discuss the marketing applications of nostalgia and introduce nostalgia in the Japanese context through the concepts of *furusato* and *amae.* Next, I will connect the concept of *amae* to cute culture and the mass consumption of the Japanese character culture. The methodology for this study, representational analysis will then be introduced, after which I will go over the selected materials for the analysis. After the analysis I will conclude this paper with my findings and suggestions for further study.

2. Overview of studies and theories on nostalgia

As a complex phenomenon inherent to the human experience, nostalgia has been studied and defined by several different disciplines. For the purposes of this study, I will mostly concentrate on definitions of nostalgia from the field of sociology and marketing. In addition to this restriction, I will limit my coverage to works from the 20th century onward with only a brief acknowledgement to earlier studies. From the scholars addressed here, Fred Davis is one of the most referred in nostalgia studies: several scholars build on his definition of nostalgia in their works. Davis' writings about nostalgia will also serve as the baseline of my introduction to theories on nostalgia.

In this section I will introduce the definitions and categorizations of nostalgia and take into account its utilization in advertising texts. After establishing a working understanding of nostalgia through these aspects, I will discuss the utilization of nostalgic images in advertising texts. Finally, I will consider the nature of nostalgic feeling in the particular setting of Japan, mirroring the situation against more generalized definitions and theories on nostalgia.

2.1 Defining nostalgia

According to Davis, the etymology of the word nostalgia goes back to the seventeenth century and the word itself is a combination of the Greek words *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful condition). He explains that nostalgia as a form of homesickness was considered an ailment comparable to physical illnesses complete with a set of identifiable symptoms until around the turn of the 20th century: by this time, the term had for the most part been demedicalized and had also begun to emerge in everyday popular speech. (Davis 1979, pp. 1-5.) Feelings of homesickness have always been present in human life. The concept has been approached on several fields, but the definitions of nostalgia have mostly been ambiguous and slightly varying depending on which discipline it has been studied by. Still, most of the definitions identify nostalgia in a strikingly similar way with its bittersweet feelings toward things no longer available.

Davis has offered a definition from the field of sociology: nostalgia is identified as a positive evocation of a personal past in the context of some negative feeling toward the present time or circumstances (1979, p. 18). Thus, according to this definition, nostalgia is viewed as a condition arising from a significant change in life or possibly a stressing situation. Indeed, one of Davis' key propositions on nostalgia has to do with coping in difficult situations and constructing identity: he sees nostalgia as a way for an individual to relate the present situation to his or hers past and future. Davis proposes that nostalgia is a way of coping amid the threats of discontinuity in life by muting out the negative aspects of memories or adding charm to the memories about ordinary things, while also cultivating a positive stance against past experiences. This process helps identity construction and maintenance by ensuring a certain level of stability during processes of change, so that the individual amid change is more able to place himself in a smooth continuum of self and identity. (Davis 1979, pp. 31-39.) Put simply, people tend to be more nostalgic in times of discontinuity, change and stress.

In the 1990's nostalgia began to widely interest scholars in the field of marketing and consumer research, and applications and effects of nostalgic advertising were identified as valid research subjects. Holbrook and Schindler (1991), although founding their definition of nostalgia on Davis' thoughts, expanded his definition to suit the needs of consumer research. They see nostalgia as ”a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)” (Holbrook & Schindler 1991, p. 330). A popular research stream in consumer research explored

nostalgia proneness and age-related preferences in connection to nostalgia. Davis sees adolescence as the general time period individuals usually feel nostalgic toward and late adulthood and old age as the time when nostalgia is most usually felt (1979, p. 57 & pp. 64-67). However, more recent research by Holbrook (1993) investigating the link between age, the development of consumer tastes and nostalgia proneness concluded that age and nostalgia proneness work independently in shaping consumer preferences and pointed toward nostalgia proneness as a characteristic varying from person to person.

Another stream of consumer research regarding nostalgia has placed value on mapping out the common themes and stimuli of nostalgic reflection. Holak and Havlena (1992) identified key people (family, friends or acquaintances), tangible items that are personally significant, intangible items (such as songs) and events either personal or collective in nature as stimuli for nostalgic reminiscences. People in particular were identified as stimuli for nostalgic recollection of events, while objects tended to stimulate nostalgic memories of home (Holak & Havlena, 1992). On a similar note, in their study on nostalgic bonding experience Holbrook and Schindler (2003) noted that although there is no limit to the types of objects that can be felt nostalgic about, relations with other people and the security of a place serve as sources of powerful nostalgic emotions. Their study results also underlined the importance of the presence of strong feelings in creating nostalgic memories. (2003, pp. 121-122.)

The complex nature and especially the bittersweet quality of nostalgic feeling points to possibly unpredictable effects when nostalgic triggers are applied to marketing campaigns. Holak and Havlena's study (1998) revealed that although nostalgic emotion is basically positive, the mix of emotions associated with it had some negative aspects as well: the most dominant emotions were discovered to be desire stemming from a feeling of loss, sadness, joy, gratitude, warmth and surgency (Holak & Havlena 1998, pp. 221-222).

In summary, nostalgia is conceptualized as a complex emotional response toward objects, people and events from the past, simultaneously involving positive and negative feelings combined to form an intricate construct of longing for things from the past. Susceptibility to nostalgia varies from individual to individual in the characteristic of nostalgia proneness. Similarly, the reactions to nostalgic triggers are hard to predict and depend on personal experiences, life events and consumption choices in the past. Since nostalgic feeling involves the element of temporal progress and is directed at past experiences and objects, older age is usually recognized as the time when individuals feel most nostalgic. Discontinuity and life changes have been theorized to increase the tendency to nostalgic recollection and affective feelings toward the past.

2.2 Categorizations of nostalgia

The several categorizations of nostalgia stem from the varying nature of nostalgic feeling from person to person and the myriad of things that can be felt nostalgic about. Here, I will present some of the more usual categorizations from the fields of sociology and consumer research.

Davis (1979) divides nostalgic reactions into three categories by the shifts happening on the cognitive level: simple nostalgia, reflexive nostalgia and interpreted nostalgia. According to Davis, the most frequently experienced simple nostalgia involves the concept of things having been better in a past point in time that is being felt nostalgic about. The second order of nostalgia, reflexive nostalgia goes beyond simple nostalgia by calling into question the accuracy of the nostalgic feeling, and more specifically putting the notion of things being better in the past into a new perspective. Interpreted nostalgia takes one step further from reflexive nostalgia by pondering on the nostalgic feeling and on its appearance at specific times, as well as on its significance to the person feeling nostalgic. (Davis 1979, pp. 16-26.)

Kessous and Roux (2008) differentiate between two types of nostalgia in terms of discontinuity and continuity in life studied through brands and objects. According to them, long-standing nostalgia associated with continuity is observed in cases where longer periods of time, such as childhood and adolescence are considered as happier times in contrast to the present moment. First-time nostalgia, on the other hand is observed in situations where nostalgia is felt toward a moment of discontinuity in life: a significant or unique life event that creates an unique emotional experience that will become a landmark in an individual's personal history. (Kessous & Roux 2008, pp. 198-202.) When considered in relation to Davis' thoughts of nostalgia helping individuals through periods of discontinuation in life in order to create a feeling of continuation, discontinuations in life appear to present as opportunities for nostalgic emotions to arise toward previous significant life events and continuity while they also construct personal history, which in turn can be felt nostalgic about later in life. In this way, life events and nostalgia are closely intertwined and constantly put to work in identity construction through the reflection of personal history.

Davis' conception of nostalgia being a ”positively toned evocation of a lived past” (1979, p. 18) implicitly refers to nostalgia being toward an individual's personal past. However, the occurrence of historical nostalgia toward time periods, objects, styles etc. which were common before the birth of the person feeling nostalgic has also been argued for. Lowenthal (1985) has noted the possibility of nostalgic feeling reaching back historically to cover eras before one's birth, which are recalled through collective memory. Holbrook and Schindler (1991) also accept

this temporal dimension of nostalgic feeling into their definition of nostalgia, as covered earlier. Similarly, Stern (1992) distinguishes between historical and personal nostalgia. She defines historical nostalgia as an escape from contemporary life to the distant fictive past before birth, which is viewed as inherently superior to the present moment. Distinct from historical nostalgia, Stern defines personal nostalgia as the idealization of one's own personally remembered past, which concentrates especially on the sentimentalized concept of home. (1992, pp. 13-16.)

Baker and Kennedy (1994) divide nostalgic associations into three categories based on experiences on which the emotions are founded on: real, simulated and collective nostalgia. They perceive real nostalgia to be the sentimental yearning for the personally experienced past, while simulated nostalgia presents as yearning for an indirectly experienced past, in which case the feeling can be attained through simulation. Collective nostalgia is identified as the yearning felt toward the past of a specific culture, a generation or a nation, which presents itself fairly consistently between individuals from a similar background (same culture, country, or generation). (Baker & Kennedy 1994, pp. 169-173.)

In summary, nostalgia can be categorized through different factors including the personal distance to the time period serving as the trigger (personal and historical nostalgia), cognitive shifts in nostalgic reflection (simple, reflexive and interpretive nostalgia) and the scope and nature of the time window or event or time being felt nostalgic about (long-standing and first-time nostalgia). Nostalgic feeling can also be divided into real, simulated and collective nostalgia, where collective nostalgia stems from shared aspects when talking about histories of specific nations or cultures.

2.3 Nostalgic triggers in advertising texts

The complexity of nostalgic feeling and the unpredictability of consumer reaction to nostalgia-based marketing makes nostalgia a difficultly wielded but potentially powerful advertising tool. Several scholars have proposed ways of circumventing the adverse effects (sadness, sense of loss) associated with nostalgic recollection.

Holak and Havlena (1998) proposed three scenarios in which the sense of loss consumers might encounter in nostalgia-based marketing is diminished. Firstly, if the consumption of the product allows the consumer to recapture the original feeling. Secondly, if the message is not too emotionally charged but moderate, and thirdly if the subject of nostalgic feeling is not connected to the consumer individually but generally (e.g. nostalgia for a distant era) (1998, p. 223).

Kessous and Roux (2008) have also proposed several strategies where nostalgia can be effectively utilized in marketing and creation of brand attachment. In accordance with their continuity/discontinuity framework introduced earlier, they identified four trigger moments for nostalgic feelings, each of them with their respective strategy. They propose that people who feel nostalgic about their everyday past respond well to brands that create a feeling of security and reassurance. In turn, people feeling nostalgic about traditions are proposed to respond to brands that create points of reference otherwise lacking and communicate authenticity. People who tend to feel nostalgic about unique moments and objects are theorized to respond to brands that attempt to connect the past to the present with their products, symbolizing continuity through time. Finally, Kessous and Roux propose that people attached to transition tend to respond to functional attributes of a brand and connect them to identity communication. (Kessous & Roux 2008, pp. 204-205.)

The four trigger moments proposed by Kessous and Roux share some aspects with Stern's categorization of nostalgia into historical and personal, which is why their propositions for marketing applications are somewhat similar as well. Stern sees personal nostalgia applicable for products that offer comfort and reconstructions of the reassuring home, while historical nostalgia is more suited for products aiming to articulate a consumer's status and social self image (1992, p. 19). Thus, historical nostalgia would also serve as an effective nostalgia trigger for consumers valuing traditions, continuity and attempt to articulate social status through the value associated with them. However, as has been shown by Muehling and Pascal (2012), advertisements capitalizing on personal nostalgia based on yearning for a lived past tend to achieve a greater level of advertisement involvement and self-reflection in consumers than advertisements utilizing historical nostalgia for a past that hasn't been experienced. Despite this difference in effectiveness, their study results also indicated that advertisements utilizing nostalgia in either its personal or historical sense outperform non-nostalgic advertisements in inducing advertisement involvement and self-reflection. (Muehling & Pascal 2012, pp. 112-114.) These results somewhat contradict the previously introduced propositions by Holak and Havlena (1998), who considered more neutral and toned down nostalgia which is not as clearly associated with personal experiences as more suitable or 'safe' for advertising purposes in terms of the feelings of loss associated with nostalgia being less pronounced. Thus, as advertising relying on elements of personal nostalgia may be more effective in provoking self-reflection and involvement, it can also draw out feelings of sadness in consumers and counteract the positive effects to some extent. In their study of applications of nostalgia for the purposes of hospitality marketing and place branding, Hunt and Johns also concluded that even though

nostalgia is a well suited tool for building positive associations toward places and brands, brand and advertising images should be carefully selected to avoid provoking negative feelings in consumers (2013, pp. 21-22).

These results of previous studies on nostalgia-based advertising effectiveness suggest that while nostalgia can be a powerful tool for evoking positive emotions in consumers, advertisers walk a fine line when selecting imagery for their campaigns. Some scholars believe in more neutral and generalized nostalgia to be a more successful tool in creating brand images and others see advertisements drawing on personal nostalgia to be more efficient, even if a riskier route to building brand image.

2.4 Nostalgia in the Japanese cultural context

The notions of collective nostalgia point toward nostalgia being a culturally bound concept with possible triggers varying from culture to culture. Additionally, each culture inevitably has its own cultural products and trends that represent nostalgic triggers in a specific cultural context. As the studies presented earlier have been carried out in a western cultural environment, their results may not necessarily be generalized to East Asia and Japan, which is why nostalgia in Japan must be observed in its proper cultural context in order to be understood in relation to these studies.

In Japan's case, nostalgia is generally associated with homesickness and the sense of homelessness. The Japanese language has several words that refer to nostalgic feeling, and most of them even incorporate the notions of village or hometown and longing in their spelling, explicitly communicating longing for a home place. For example, *kaikyō* (懐郷) combines symbols of longing, recalling and getting attached (懐) to native place, hometown or village (郷)[2]. Similarly, *bōkyō* (望郷) combines desire, hope and expectation (望) with the notion of native place. As an example of a stronger emotional charge, *kyōshū* (郷愁) communicates lamentation, anxiousness and grieving in connection with native place. Nostalgia can also communicated in its more generalized sense of missing things past with the word *kaiko* (懐古), in which longing and oldness are combined. The character 懐 can also represent nostalgic

[2]As *kanji*-characters usually hold several meanings, I will not be covering all possible meanings here and limit the translations to only the relevant ones.

longing independently in the widely used verb *natsukashimu* (懐かしむ), which refers to affectionate recollection of things past. These examples from the Japanese language point to the presence of nostalgic feeling in a strikingly similar way that was uncovered in Western studies, with the exception of feeling being more directly pointed at home place. As was also briefly discussed before, *furusato* serves as a powerful nostalgic trigger for many Japanese people. As noted by Robertson, *furusato* has been one of the most powerful symbols used by the mass media, politicians and city planners in Japan since the 1970's (1994, p. 14). Creighton (1997) also points out that around that time, a retro boom romanticizing Japan's prewar agrarian lifestyle started to gain strength (The nostalgic voyage, para. 1).

Doi remarks that rapid modernization in Japan's case is accompanied by a sense of alienation and the loss of something irreplaceable in exchange (2001, pp. 146-147). On similar lines, Creighton (1997) notes that the prevalence of nostalgia for a home place is often credited to rapid postwar urbanization of rural areas and the sense of loneliness stemming from the loss of the agrarian community life idealized over city life. According to her, the lost village community is considered as a place of belonging where a person can fulfill their desires for interdependence (*amae*). From this Creighton draws the conclusion that as the actual ties to rural communities have been mostly severed (with some urbanites having no memory of a rural hometown at all) and as the imagery of *furusato* has been generalized in the mass marketing imagery, the context and place identity of *furusato* have also been masked so that rural villages that aren't personally significant can still symbolize a nostalgic home place and produce nostalgic feelings. (1997, The nostalgic voyage.)

Like Creighton, Robertson also acknowledges the nurturing aspect of village life and the need for *amae*: *furusato* is connected to the concept of motherly love to the point of synonymity (1994, pp. 20-22). Doi (2001) connects the concept of *amae* to identity formation. As he points out, the Japanese people have traditionally stressed the importance of the group or collective rather than the individual. According to Doi, in an environment where the individual is submersed into the group, the individual has to have previous experience of *amae* in order to possess a sense of self. The psychological desire to belong ultimately boils down to the need for indulgence and interdependence. (2001, pp. 135-141.) In summary, as *amae* is connected to the safety of the communal life and the sense of belonging, it also takes the mind back to childhood with associations to mother, indulgence and dependence. As Doi explains, the contemporary Japanese society is strangely permeated with *amae*, even to a point where the line between children and adults is blurred (ibid. pp. 163-165). Thus, the childlike need to be indulged and taken care of is not restricted to children, but can affect adults as well. This is

where *amae*, *furusato* and nostalgia toward an imagined homeplace become intertwined: the need for interdependence and indulgence can be satisfied through the imagined homeplace, which then becomes the object of nostalgia.

Robertson (1988, 1994, 1998) has widely discussed the phenomenon of native placemaking, or *furusato-zukuri* in Japan. She defines it as a process where "*furusato* is evoked into existence as a political project through which experiences and memories are shaped and reproduced" (1998, p. 115.) In other words, *furusato-zukuri* is used as an administrative tool to re-articulate cultural identity, values and traditions. On similar lines, Creighton associates the need for belongingness with the desire to affirm a collective identity in a contemporary age where the traditional village life has been lost (1998, p. 129). In this way, *furusato* imagery actually produces an imagined community for the Japanese people, which in turn builds towards a shared cultural identity. Cultural values are also shaped through mass media and marketing especially in the travel industry, where the affective power of *furusato* is used to draw people to actual rural villages to experience the nostalgia first hand and enjoy products that act as nostalgic triggers. However, the ideas of *furusato* are somewhat disconnected from actual places in rural Japan. As noted by Creighton, the nostalgic feelings are directed at a place in time rather than a geographical location (1998, pp. 143-144). This means that the nostalgia achieved through travel in the case of *furusato* is, at least for most people, a simulated one.

Robertson (1988, 1994) has discussed the role of festivals (*matsuri*) in native placemaking efforts. She has noted that *furusato-zukuri* efforts have for a large part concentrated on reviving and reinventing shrine-like festivals as they have considerable nostalgic value: shrines have since the Meiji-period formed the affective and administrative heart of traditional village life (1988, p. 511). Festivals are symbolic of authentic community feeling, and they can effectively be used to create an old village ambience and to evoke place- and past-affirming nostalgia (Robertson 1994, pp. 38-39). Thus, festivals and traditions associated with them are embedded with nostalgic value and can act as potent nostalgic triggers. Knight (1997) connects *furusato*, festivals and folk tales together as important parts of creating communal spirit and a sense of belonging and notes that in the 1980's many municipalities in Japan encouraged the preservation and circulation of folk tales in order to communicate the traditional past of community to younger generations. According to Knight, festivals and folk tales as elements of traditional village culture are in the contemporary context being skillfully utilized in making places attractive to tourists: elements from the past are being used strategically in the present to add the charm of *furusato* to places. (Knight 1997, pp. 149-153.) Not only do they add a certain intrigue to a place, folk tales and the passing down of tradition also represent a kind of temporal

level of collectivity in connection with the notion of native place. Physical places such as landmarks and historical buildings are also used as a way of bringing the past into the present, as Robertson has illustrated with the example of Tokyo (1994, p. 17).

Nostalgia for home place in Japan represents a unique setting of nostalgic triggers and culturally shared concepts about traditionality and community. Nostalgia for *furusato* may carry elements of personal nostalgia for people with experiences and memories from a rural hometown. However, the main bulk of the nostalgia for *furusato* represents a mix of historical and collective nostalgia for an actual time where village life was more common. Since the nostalgia does not necessarily stem from actual personal memories, the experiences are simulated through consumption choices and travel. Still, the nostalgic experience of *furusato* also evokes feelings connected with childhood, motherhood and nurturing, *furusato* imagery may serve as a trigger to personal memories of childhood and visiting one's grandparents in the countryside. In this way, personal memories can also heighten the longing for native place. I propose that the ability of Japanese cultural products to induce nostalgia is similar to the mechanisms discovered in the Western studies: the abundance of local specialty products available to consumers are marketed through the imagery of *furusato* and thus serve as triggers to nostalgic feeling.

3. Amae, cute culture and consumerism

Earlier in this paper I have provided a tentative introduction to the term of *amae.* In this section I will open Takeo Doi's theory on it further through the writings of Frank A. Johnson. While many scholars engaged in the discussion recognize the term in some way, almost every aspect of it has been under heated discussion among the academics. As a wide-ranging phenomenon concerning human emotion in the Japanese society, it is no wonder that defining it requires consideration on both its social and psychological sides. I am inclined to follow the definition of Johnson, who bases his discussion on *amae* on the theories of Doi. However, the critique of Doi made by Taketomo (1986) also opens an interesting window to understanding the phenomenon. After opening up the concept of *amae* a bit more, I will move on to discuss aspects of cute culture that allow *amae* to manifest. Lastly, I will connect these phenomena to mass consumption by introducing some of Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on simulation, a concept that is foundational in understanding why cute culture and characterization allow people to feel nurtured and comforted.

In his work Dependency and Japanese Socialization (1993), Johnson offers a comprehensive summary of Doi's work so far and in many ways, takes over carrying the torch of his studies. He constructs a synthesis of Doi's work and the critique it has received, creating a modified definition of his own. According to Johnson's synthesis, *amae*, or indulgent dependency is psychoanalytically recognized as an innate drive or instinct that is observable throughout the lifespan from infancy to old age. However, *amae* is not a unitary phenomenon and can be examined through various viewpoints. Socially, it is a part of a larger construct of dependent and interdependent relationships where *amae* may be observed in social transactions between asymmetrical partners in which the other seeks gratification and the other provides it. It can be examined both verbally and nonverbally. *Amae* is recognized as a Japanese cultural expression of indulgent dependency and its appearance in social interactions is heavily influenced by Japanese cultural norms of communication. (Johnson 1993, pp. 200-207.) These norms have been identified by several scholars as *on* (sense of obligation for gratitude), *giri* (social obligation), *ninjō* (human feeling sought through *giri*), and *enryo* (ritualized deference) (ibid. pp. 80-84). Taketomo (1986) criticized Doi's definition for its generalized nature and his claim that *amae* can be observed throughout an individual's lifespan. He agrees with Doi on the child-mother relationship being prototypical for *amae* after childhood, but he proposes that *amae* after infancy and in adulthood is only mimicry of the mother-infant relationship through childlike playfulness and coquetry. (Taketomo 1986, pp. 529-537.)

Although it is generally assumed that indulgent dependency manifests interpersonally, *amae* is often connected to cute culture. Yomota (2006) sees Japan's unique cute culture as the latest link in a continuum of aesthetic trends in the country. In the era of mass production, the aesthetics of cute dominate the culture of consumerism (2006, pp. 14-18). Han (2017) argues that consumption of characters serves the purpose of self-creation by means of seeing the desired self through the characters (2017, pp. 94-96). Han sees the consumption of cute things as an affective experience where people redirect their feelings to another person or an object due to a sense of familiarity. Through transference like this it is possible to alleviate pressures of everyday life (*iyashi*). (2017, pp. 78-81.) I argue that the wide-spread visibility of mascot characters further contributes to this sense of familiarity. Aihara (2007) discusses Bandai Character Research Institute's study on what kind of emotional purpose consumers see for cute characters, the results of which support Han's argument. The results of the study highlighted the need for emotional comfort (*iyashi*), protection, escape from reality, return to childhood, confirmation of own existence, self-transformation and a sense of happiness or mood change. (2007, pp. 27-42.) Also in line with these results, Yano (2013) connects character consumption

to escapism and *amae*: *kawaii* (cute) characters and goods evoke a sense of consumer empathy, where the consumer can both travel back to one's past to engage in childlike behavior and still feel like a caregiver towards the vulnerable characters (2013, pp. 55-59). In fact, vulnerability is a key concept when defining *kawaii*. Yomota (2006) connects the Japanese sense of cute with smallness, miniatures and incompleteness. As opposed to the Western temperament towards incomplete things, he points out the Japanese tendency to see value and beauty especially in incomplete and childlike things. In a way, children can be considered miniatures of adults. (2006, pp. 121-123.) Furthermore, miniatures can be seen as crystallizations of the original, and therefore especially beautiful (ibid. pp. 94-95).

When researching post-modern mass production and consumption, one cannot avoid running into the theories of Jean Baudrillard and his ideas of simulation. Subsequently it is unsurprising that several of the authors contributing to the discussion also recognize the relevance of his theories when it comes to cute culture, its consumption and *amae*. In his work Simulacra and Simulation (1994) Baudrillard illustrates the workings of signs, simulation and how simulating the simulation results in hyperreality. According to him, while representation implies equivalence between reality and the sign representing it, simulation has no such basis in reality and can be a false representation. As simulations progress farther and farther from the real, they become simulations of themselves: simulacra, that have no relation to the real. (1994, pp. 1-7.) In this way, the copies of reality (simulations) are copied, having no original anymore. Baudrillard illustrates the concept of hyperreality through Disneyland and adults acting childlike in the simulated environment. In this example, the world outside of Disneyland represents hyperreality. The park itself is a simulation of American life created to allow us to believe the world outside is real, when the reality of the world outside has long been lost in simulation. (1994, pp. 12-14.) The purpose of this example is to show how through continuous simulation and reproduction of meaning people become unable to differentiate reality from simulation. When this theory is considered in connection to mass production, copies of originals are being replicated and consumed in unheard of quantities, even further distancing us from reality and contributing to hyperreality. Han (2017) argues that the hyperreal character world involves three aspects: the creation of a world of signs, the reality that is felt in that world and the implosion of signs through reproduction. More precisely, consumers experience happiness through purchasing commodities produced according to the character world's signs, they experience a more attractive reality in this simulated world and through their consumption strengthen the hyperreal with reproduction. (2017, pp. 100-101.) Yano makes a point relevant to this idea: through the example of Hello Kitty, she argues that fictionalized details and

comprehensive biographical details are used to solidify and authenticate the character as a real entity (2013, pp. 77-79). Aihara (2007) addresses Japan's characterization (キャラ化, *kyaraka*) through the concept of simulacra. He notes that the copy can have an aura, an attractiveness called *moe*[3] that the original never had. For Aihara, the characterization of the Japanese society is the result of leading lives immersed in simulacra to the point that the character world feels more real than the actual reality. This may even develop into an aversion of reality in favor of the simulacra, which individuals now desperately use for production and realization of their identities. Aihara describes that this is done by reproducing the simulacra as a pseudo-original, which in turn results in even more affection through transference and fortification of the feeling of reality. (2007, pp. 155-159.)

The relationships between consumers and regional mascots as such do not straightforwardly fit into the theoretical framework of *amae*. Mascots are not human, which means that the evocation of *amae* in these relationships presumes that mascots are intelligent entities capable of indulging and being indulged. Furthermore, there is always an agenda of promotion or image creation behind the communication, which makes the two sides of the interaction asymmetrical and the mascots more inclined to indulge. The relationship is imagined and in a sense, a product to be consumed in itself. As such, the relationships are not governed by the same set of social norms as normally. Many of the mascots communicate rather freely through their social media channels and interact with their fans, creating situations where these norms might arise in addition to the situations with one-sided nonverbal communication. In my view, these relationships require very little *enryo* or ritualized deference, but *giri* (social obligation) and *ninjō* (human feeling sought through *giri*) are still observable in the interactions between characters and consumers. Mascots are presented as close friends or even family, which together with furusato imagery creates an artificial sense of closeness. I argue that this sense of closeness is what makes manifestations of *amae* possible. Taketomo's (1986) notions of mimicry fit into this proposal well: *amae* can manifest exactly due to both parties realizing the artificial nature of the situation and play-acting accordingly. In a sense, parts of the hospitality industry can be considered as opportunities to purchase experiences of *amae*, the feeling of home and being indulged. Mascot campaigns aim to create a history, a storyline and a meaning

[3] *Moe* signifies something that is cute in a specifically girly way: written with the kanji 萌 (sprouting, budding), the term is often used to describe a young girl on the verge of womanhood. However, objects and actions may be described as *moe* as well.

for the mascot's existence: another world to which consumers are invited to immerse themselves in. As noted before, worlds like these can transport consumers into their childhood or simply offer a respite from the stresses of life (*iyashi*). Mascot goods provide a way for consumers to coddle their favorite character and to escape to another world wherever they are. Yano notes that characters animate the world as a comforting place (2013, p. 67). In this case it stands exceptionally true: the convention of sending mascots (actors dressed in huge, clumsy costumes) into the world as a moving, communicating creature does contribute to the sense of the character being real. To summarize, when immersing themselves into the fantasy world of mascot characters, consumers (with the possible exception of children) engage in play-acting for purposes that may have to do with the need for indulgence, comfort, escape from reality or identity creation. In the framework of *amae* and *furusato*, simulation through consumption offers a way for modern day consumers to put themselves in environments where through mimicry, a way to return to childhood, imagined community and interdependence is possible. Simulation enables consumers to satisfy their nostalgic cravings and immerse themselves in nostalgic environments.

4. Method

I have chosen representation analysis as the suitable method of study for this paper. The purpose of this study is to bring forth the connections between place brands (in this case articulated by regional mascots) and identify triggers of nostalgic feelings for Japanese people. In the cultural context of Japan, perceiving mascots as representations of their respective place images is helpful. By searching these representations for nostalgic elements, a connection between *gotōchi-kyara* and *furusato* imagery with all its references to *amae* becomes observable. Here I will briefly outline popular approaches to the concept of representation. The constructionist approach to representations will be discussed in more depth, as it is the approach on which I will base my analysis later on.

Representation as an action is commonly associated with standing in for, or representing something or someone as a substitute of the actual object or person. This function of standing in sometimes encompasses a larger group of objects and conceptions. When considered in contrast with the action of presenting something, where the actual object is being perceived, representation rather takes the role of articulating the meaning of the actual object without it necessarily taking the form of the object. In this way, representations can serve as symbolical

referents to objects or groups of objects, communicating their meanings through connections created in language and culture. Some meanings are more widely understood, as for example a chair may be perceived as representing all objects that are categorized as chairs, when others may differ depending on the connections the person perceiving them has developed through his or her use of language and interactions in a culture. As concisely summed up by Knuuttila and Lehtinen, representation is traditionally understood as an object or an attribute with the capacity of making a reference to something outside of itself (2010, p. 11).

When understanding culture through representations, it is first necessary to ponder on how meanings are created and perceived. According to Hall (1997), since the cultural turn in the human and social sciences, meanings are seen as produced and constructed through language rather than inherently loaded into things. Hall explains that inside a culture, people use systems of representation in roughly the same way (share the same cultural codes), through which the meanings constituting culture are produced and circulated: this is referred to as the social constructionist approach to representation. Hall notes that after the broader discursive turn in in the social and cultural sciences, the constructionist view involved two main approaches: the semiotic analysis of representations focusing on how language, texts and objects produce meaning, and the discursive analysis focusing on the effects and consequences of representations. (Hall 1997, pp. 4-6.)

Webb (2009) introduces the other two ways in which representation can be studied: as a reflection of meanings in the world (the reflective or mimetic approach) or as an intentional conveying of meaning (the intentional approach). Webb sees these approaches as problematic: language does not always reflect something already existing in reality but creates reality, and in the case of imposing a certain meaning to a message the outcoding of it in the way imposed cannot be guaranteed as messages can be interpreted in varying ways depending on the codes utilized. (Webb 2009, pp. 43-44.) Similarly, Hall (1997) has pointed out the problems in these approaches. As the reflective approach conceives representations as merely reflecting meanings already embedded in the world, he notes that in order to effectively communicate, this connection must still necessarily be mediated by the mental images connecting the concept of an object to its meaning, which can differ depending on the cultural codes used. On the intentional approach, Hall points out that words cannot simply signify the private intended meaning the speaker wishes to convey, as language functions on socially constructed rules and conventions in order to be understood. (Hall 1997, pp. 24-25.) I agree with Webb's and Hall's views presented here and lean towards the constructionist approach of studying representations and meanings as constitutive of culture.

According to Hall (1997), who represents the constructionist view, organized conceptual maps of things in the world incorporating the mental representations of them are required in order to make sense of the world. He specifies that people from the same culture have roughly similar conceptual maps and interpret the world in an accordingly similar way. However, as Hall notes, this system of creating conceptual maps is not enough to communicate and exchange representations efficiently, but a shared language system is also necessary in the process of constructing meanings. Meanings are constructed in interactions and in time become fixed, resulting in the creation of codes which govern the translations between conceptual maps and language. (Hall 1997, pp. 17-21.) As codes are the result of social conventions, these systems work together in constituting culture through the production of meanings to things in the world. It should also be noted that since social and linguistic conventions are not fixed but change over time, meanings are consequently not entirely fixed to their real world counterparts.

Still, representation does not necessarily have to point to a concrete, conceivable object in the real world. This kind of representation is often encountered in art, for example. As noted by Pietarinen, resemblance or a symmetrical relationship is not necessary between representation and it's object: for instance, the object may also be a simple mental image or a notion (2010, p. 105). Hall also notes that representations are able to refer to even imaginary objects, people or events (1997, p. 17). On similar lines, Webb acknowledges that representation can sometimes attempt to convey something intangible, such as a mood or a feeling (2009, pp. 4-5). Representation, then, has the ability to communicate or evoke feelings or associations with things that may not be obvious from the form of the representing object. This notion further highlights how the collectively consistent interpretation of representations and the production of meaning is dependent on culturally shared codes and context.

As mentioned earlier, one of the two main approaches to representations in the social constructionist school is the semiotic approach. The point of origin for the semiotic approach to representation can be traced back to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's work *Course in General Linguistics*, originally published in 1916 (Webb 2009, p. 45 & Hall 1997, pp. 30-31). Saussure perceived language as a socially constructed set of rules and codes, but separated the system of language (*langue*) from the acts of communicating (*parole*) (1959, pp. 9-15). Saussure also saw signs as consisting of a signifier (the sign itself serving as a trigger) and the signified (a concept in the mind responding to the trigger) (ibid. pp. 66-69). Despite his views being structuralist and later being criticized on the overt concentration on the signifier/signified setting and the formal aspects of language, Saussure's thoughts have been credited for pulling attention to the social element of language and its significance in producing meanings (Hall 1997, pp. 34-35).

Saussure's thoughts have later on been adapted and built on to suit the study of representations from a semiotic viewpoint. Barthes (1977) further developed Saussure's language/speech setting to take in any kinds of signifying systems or syntagma, which enabled things such as objects, events and actions to be perceived as representations and to be subjected to semiotic analysis. As Hall clarified, this means that close to anything (Hall illustrates this through an example of fashion) is identifiable as a sign in its contextual code consisting of shared mental connections, which enables it to be read as language and consequently interpreted in connection to wider cultural concepts, themes or meanings (1997: 37-38). Barthes (1977) refers to the first level in which an object, event or action is recognized through a general signifying system as the level of denotation. The latter phase where the object, event or action is decoded even further and connected to wider semantic fields of culture was referred to by Barthes as the level of connotation. (1977, pp. 89-94.) In this way, connotative meanings connecting representation to wider contexts of meaning can be drawn out of representations identified on a denotative level. This manner of approaching representations also enables their study on a multitude of fields, such as advertising, popular culture, photography and so on.

The second constructionist approach to representations, discursive approach, focuses on representation processes more widely as parts of social practices and as influenced by power. Building on Saussure and Barthes, Foucault argued for the production of knowledge and meaning through discourses that were produced through rules and practices in the society in specific historical contexts (Hall 1997, pp. 43-44). This approach stressed the role of relations of power in the modern society as regulating social practices and knowledge, and ultimately also the discursive formations that produce meanings (ibid. pp. 46-51 & Lidchi 1997, p. 185). Discourse is, however, a term utilized in several academic fields and its applications are equally varied: the very brief mention here is limited to Foucault's social constructionist approach and is by no means exhaustive.

From these two paths, I am inclined to follow the semiotic approach in studying regional mascots as representations. I will observe the meanings communicated through regional characters in the light of the Japanese cultural context and especially the connotations arising in connection to *furusato* and nostalgic feelings. In their utilization of nostalgia, the mascots studied here are much like the representations in art, attempting to project a landscape of feeling through associations. In the setting of Japan, culturally constructed *furusato* imagery is communicated in various ways and also utilized in travel campaigns and advertising which build toward place images in place branding. Through the analysis of representations I will attempt to show that this cultural code is also underlying in the images conveyed through

regional mascots. Like advertising, regional mascots are conceivable as attempting to influence the creation of place images and meaning making and through them consumer choices, which makes them somewhat politically loaded. Advertising images utilizing mental connections to *furusato* aim for this connection: however, in the case of regional mascots the associations are not as clearly identifiable and require the cultural context and codes of Japan in order to be evoked. I believe that representational analysis enables the pinpointing of these connections.

5. Introduction of the material

The material studied here consists of four selected regional mascots, which I believe to utilize nostalgic elements in order to create positively toned associations with place brands. The characters have been selected based on their success in the regional mascot-category of the annual Yuru-kyara Grand Prix competition. To qualify for the study, the character is required to have won the competition at least once and to have ranked in the top five at least once. Basing the mascot selection on the Yuru-kyara Grand Prix rankings allows the study to connect the results of the analysis to their popularity, and as Yuru-kyara Grand Prix rankings are created via public vote, the rankings reflect the characters' overall popularity well.

Some characters may embody several nostalgic triggers and some may only rely heavily on a single visual trigger. As mascots are created as moving and acting subjects communicating their message, their character will be considered in the wider context of their campaigns and actions. It should be noted that when speech or text is used in these campaigns, the language in use is almost unexceptionally Japanese. This goes to show that the public relations in play are predominantly aimed at Japanese consumers. Regional characters appear as multimodal texts utilizing visual ques and sound, in addition to which they can communicate. This communication is largely confined to movements and gestures as when appearing in person, the characters are often mute and their movements are quite restricted and clumsy resulting from the bulkiness of the costumes. However, when characters appear in their drawn form on a website or a pamphlet for instance, words are often put in their mouths and communication is indicated through speech bubbles. Audiovisual content produced for the mascots' public relations campaigns often features subtitles for mute characters. Depending on the content, the mascots are sometimes accompanied by their PR-staff who make discussion with the mascots, highlighting the need for subtitles. The appearance of huge cute characters in real life situations and the way they interact with people creates an illusion of a fictional world with cartoon

characters overlapping with the real world.

Not all regional mascots are born cute, but if the character has been designed as such it is more than likely that the demeanor of the mascot will be childlike or adolescent. In fact, childlike mannerism is close to a norm for regional mascots. In their actions with humans and other mascots, they often exhibit playfulness, excitedness and clumsiness. It is expected that the mascots are interested in games, toys and trying out new exciting things. A term that I have encountered often while studying mascot campaigns is *chōsen* (挑戦), challenge. The characters are actively encouraged to challenge themselves to try new things, attempt tricks and engage in seemingly impossible activities. In this way, almost anything the mascots do can be made into a childlike game.

Some characters are also active users of the social media, communicating about their activities and home places through platforms such as blogs, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or YouTube. Usually the characters are openly introduced as working for public relations purposes. They are often sponsored to the status of regional or even national celebrities, and they are sometimes even sent to compete for popularity on a national level or to do PR at domestic tourism events. Interestingly, the intermingling of mascots during these events has created a new kind of social space with its own potential for image and content creation. Mascots are now presented as social beings with a network of their own: following the popularity of character competitions, many of the mascots have made friends with each other and now throw all sorts of events like birthday parties and festivals for their friends. These events feature the mascot crowd engaging in various activities such as playing children's games[4], dancing, competing in sports and so on. Several regions also hold their own mascot gatherings that are often themed for example as dance and sports festivals. The mascots also send each other messages through social media and follow each other's accounts. In this social space inhabited by mascot characters, human fans are mostly allowed in as spectators of the celebrity interactions. In events where not too many mascots are present, human interaction takes a greater part. The image characters' social media

[4] One of the most popular children's games featured in these events is *Daruma-san ga koronda*, translating as "The Daruma-doll fell over." The game is popular worldwide with slight variations and different names. One player is picked to call out the rhyme with his/her back to the other players. While the rhyme is being called, the other players are allowed to move closer to the caller. As soon as the rhyme is finished, the caller turns around and if any of the players still move, they are out. Once any of the players touches the caller, the game is over and the winner becomes the next caller. As the characters often wear bulky costumes, this makes for rather entertaining watching. Another popular game in these events is tug of war.

accounts are also a platform for direct communication between mascots and their fans: most of the messages and comments found on these accounts are from adult fans, showering the character with adoration and praise.

As local celebrities, mascots are depicted as parts of the communities they inhabit. They usually interact with their communities by visiting local businesses and appearing at events to which the characters often extend invitations. Another popular way of including the characters in the community is by having them as part of holidays. For many mascots, it is customary to send and receive year-end greetings and gifts, a tradition which in human interactions is reserved for family, friends and work contacts. In this way, the sense of intimacy and community can be nurtured through mascot imagery alongside the more public, ambassadorial public relations actions.

As a part of regional PR campaigns, the mascots are often put to work for rural revitalization campaigns. One of the most visible ways in which this is done is by lending the mascot's image to local products and businesses, intertwining the mascot imagery with regional brands. In addition to this, regional mascots tend to have their own product lines and fan products as well. Mascot goods are sold in online stores advertised by the characters, at the local shops and events both local and elsewhere in Japan. One example of how the mascots imagery goes hand in hand with the local brands is the annual Furusato Festival held in Tokyo. The festival's slogan is "*Nihon no matsuri, kokyō no aji*", translating to "The festivals of Japan, the taste of the hometown". Put simply, the event showcases the various festivals from all over Japan with cuisine and performances from the prefectures. In addition to this, the event is a gathering for mascots who come bearing their own brand goods. The festival also has its own mascot character, Tairyō Hōsaku-kun, designed by Jun Miura. (Tokyo Dome Corporation 2020.)

As the campaigns incorporating regional mascots are multimodal in nature, the analysis will take into account the meanings constructed through the mascot's promotional activities in addition to their outer appearance. In order to grasp the whole of the image creation process, a deep dive into the social media accounts for the campaigns is also necessarily done. The characters and their campaigns in this study represent very different approaches in place branding, regional PR and image creation. It should be noted that for the purposes of this study, I will limit my research to the regional aspects that are highlighted and marketed through the mascot campaigns and communication. The products, services and traditions of any region provide an endless pool of possible nostalgic triggers, but the ones relevant from the viewpoint of this study are connected to the mascot campaigns. It must also be noted that the campaigns constructed around these characters are vast, fluid and ongoing: complete coverage of all

aspects of the campaign and mascot involvement is unachievable for this study. In the analysis I will discuss four regional characters representing different parts of Japan: Shinjō-kun from the Kōchi prefecture, Sanomaru from the Tochigi prefecture, Gunma-chan from the Gunma prefecture and Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun from the Shizuoka prefecture. I will introduce each of the characters and the campaigns involving them next.

5.1 Shinjō-kun from Kōchi

Shinjō-kun (しんじょう君) takes the shape of a now extinct Japanese river otter, with a bowl of Susaki city's specialty nabeyaki-ramen on his head as a hat (Susaki City Office 2020b). The hat has a comical tendency to fall off during whatever the character does and it has been made into a recurring joke. The otter's outer appearance is plump, complete with a big belly and a protruding belly button. The character's head is huge, bald and has two round ears on each side. The eyes are big, tall and look to one side with small whimsical brows set diagonally creating a concentrated and mischievous look. Shinjō-kun's mouth is set in a smile leading down from his nose, and the character has rosy cheeks. The character's gender isn't defined, but the suffix -kun would suggest that he is male and I will refer to the character as male from here on. Still, the character is often seen doing dress-up in female clothing. Although it's not officially included in the profile, it would appear that the character was named after the river Shinjō that flows through Susaki.

The character was created in 2013 and has worked for Susaki city's PR department ever since. Shinjō-kun is introduced in his profile as five years old or so (in further posts it is explained that after turning five his otter magic makes him turn five again every year). His specialties are swimming and dancing, which he regularly demonstrates in the character's blog by engaging in water sports or taking part in yuru-kyara dance competitions which he often wins. His hobbies are listed as fashion, anime, games and being a DJ. Two of these hobbies are a major theme in the content created for the character: Shinjō-kun does actual DJ gigs and has even released a record, and he has also made somewhat of a career for himself as an e-athlete, mostly playing the popular console game Street Fighter. (Susaki City Office 2020b) The character has two sidekicks, Shinjō-river fairies Saki-chan and Suu-chan (Susaki City Office 2013).

Shinjō-kun is also a prolific supporter of the Furusato Tax system, with record-breaking achievements in collecting support for Susaki reported in 2017 (Susaki City Office 2020b). The Furusato Tax system was established in 2008 to allow Japanese taxpayers to support their

hometowns or other rural communities of their choosing by making donations in exchange for products from the area, which in turn makes the consumers eligible for a slight tax reduction for their municipal and income taxes (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2018). The Furusato Tax Portal defines the three ways in which the system provides aid in the rural communities: by revitalizing the community, by helping resolve issues in the area and stimulating the economy. With making the donation, consumers are allowed to choose the way their donation will be used. (Trustbank Co. Ltd. 2020.) The character's involvement with the system is depicted as very important to him. In a series of blog posts titled *Shinjō-kun No Natsuyasumi* (Shinjō-kun's Summer Vacation), the character and his friends are seen repeating the same summer vacation thousands of times in a time loop. The group engages in various traditional summer vacation activities such as going to the beach, catching goldfish at a festival and lighting fireworks, and the pattern is repeated over and over again with slight differences. Only when the group realize their summer vacation isn't complete without advertising for the Furusato Tax system and doing so does the time loop end. (Susaki City Office 2016a, 2016b, 2016c & 2016d.)

The blog on the Shinjō-kun Official Website documents the adventures of Shinjō-kun in an interesting, fictional way. The bulk of the content consists of storytelling similar to the summer vacation storyline introduced in the previous paragraph. The stories are told with edited pictures, written sound effects and dialogue resembling a snapshot gallery from a video. The posts usually start with Shinjō-kun going to visit someplace or talking to the Shinjō-river fairies, and the Shinjō river is also a focal point for many of the events in the blog. Another recurring character in the stories is a mysterious man wearing a metallic Buddha-mask. The adventures often end up in a misunderstanding or a conflict, but the style of the storytelling is always comedic and light-hearted. Similarly to *Shinjō-kun No Natsuyasumi*, the posts often turn into advertisements for local products, businesses or events. Most of the time the activities in the blog in some way reflect whatever it is the post ends up advertising, but in some cases the advertisement has nothing to do with the story and the combination is made intentionally humoristic. Examples of the various activities documented in the blog include going to visit hot springs, enjoying autumn colors, going to festivals, farming, and fishing. As the character is often depicted as dashing from one weird situation to another, the blog lovingly calls Shinjō-kun *Susaki Mucha Kyara,* where *mucha* stands for rash, excessive or absurd. (Susaki City Office 2020a.)

The biggest local festival Shinjō-kun annually attends is the Yosakoi dance festival. The festival is a wildly popular event that attracts dance teams from across the country and abroad.

The two-day festival culminates in a long procession formed by the teams dancing through the Susaki main street. The festival celebrates the rhythmic Yosakoi dance style that was first introduced in Kōchi with its distinctive wooden clappers, *naruko.* (Kochi Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2020.) Another notable festival is intimately connected with Shinjō-kun himself: the Gotōchi Kyara Festival in Susaki. The annual event is hosted by Shinjō-kun and revolves around his mascot friends that are invited to participate from around Japan. (Susaki City Tourism Association 2019.)

Shinjō-kun has a very strong social media presence with accounts on several different platforms. The most popular of them is his TikTok account (https://www.tiktok.com/@susaki_city_pr) with 197,100 followers [5] . As the platform specializes in short creative videos with a soundtrack of the user's choosing, most of the videos on the account are snapshots of Shinjō-kun's interactions with other mascots, his travels and short comedy films in the popular style. Still, even though the account is the most popular the character has on social media, there is not much content posted on it. Shinjō-kun's Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/shinjokun/) has 15,400 followers reported on the account. The account is full of videos and pictures of the character doing mischievous things, playing, trying out things, making tutorials, helping people, celebrating holidays, interacting with other mascots and so on. Many of his travels abroad and in Japan are also recorded here. Interestingly enough, Susaki's PR department seems to have taken a rather non-conservative approach with the mascot's Instagram-presence: in addition to the more toned-down, conventional mascot PR, the account also has quite a bit of material about the character doing rather questionable things. The mascot is sometimes depicted playing pranks, annoying people, shooting things with a BB-gun, or dancing in a seductive manner. The hashtags posted with said activities often include swearing. Overall, Shinjō-kun's Instagram account definitely keeps in line with the image of *mucha kyara* delivering the character's fans content with a youthful flair, references to meme-culture, viral challenges and colorful hashtags. His YouTube-account (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCITQl0iDxvtaryp_m3XUOHg), on the other hand represents a more toned-down approach to social media. The account has videos of doing Shinjō-kun doing DJ gigs, reviewing local products and visiting places and businesses around Kōchi, but the overwhelming majority of the videos are about the mascot's e-athlete activities and Street Fighter games. Among the content are also videos of the annual Gotōchi-kyara

[5] All follower numbers are reported as they were at the time of writing in March 2020.

Festival held in Susaki, promotional videos of the city and Susaki nabeyaki ramen videos. The character is often accompanied by his co-workers from the PR-department or his sidekick-characters, river fairies Suu-chan and Saki-chan. Many of the videos have been made into slapstick style comedy spoofs or parodies. Most of the material available on the character's Instagram is also available on the YouTube account, but the more questionable content is less visible in the library. His Twitter account (https://twitter.com/susaki_city_PR) serves a more of an informative purpose and dons 106,500 followers Shinjō-kun also has a Facebook account (https://www.facebook.com/sinjokun/), but is has the least amount of content and followers (9,000) of all his accounts. Most of the content posted overlaps with the other social media accounts.

Shinjō-kun made international news in 2019 when an American talk show host John Oliver featured him in his show. The segment was inspired by the scandal caused by the self-proclaimed and unofficial mascot for Susaki city, Chiitan. Chiitan was designed by the same artist as Shinjō-kun and unlike him, would engage in violent and inappropriate antics on social media. The two mascots did some PR together but Susaki officials soon realized the PR was not what they had hoped for as the two characters would get mixed up and the unofficial mascot was asked to step down. (J-Cast 2019.) As a response to the scandal, John Oliver decided to create his own mascot to be Shinjō-kun's new friend (LastWeekTonight 2019).

Shinjō-kun won the Yuru-kyara Grand Prix in 2016 and ranked in the top five as fourth in 2015 and 2014. The character also ranked 14th the year before in 2013. After 2016 the character has been absent from any relevant rankings in the competition, which would indicate the character peaked in popularity in 2016 after a steady rise from 2013. (Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix Implementation Committee 2020.)

5.2 Sanomaru from Sano

Working as Sano's brand character since 2011, Sanomaru (さのまる) takes the form of a white, chubby samurai dog who solves disputes and problems in a gentle way. According to Sanomaru's profile, he is male and lives in the castle town (*jōkamachi,* 城下町) of Sano. The profile also clarifies his outer appearance: on his head Sanomaru has a Sano noodle bowl as a hat with noodles peeking from under it as fringe, and on his belt two sticks of locally popular fried potatoes (*imofurai,* 芋フライ) as samurai swords. (Sano City 2019b.) The character is often seen dressed up in attire suiting the occasion, such as Christmas and Halloween costumes,

festival gear for festivals and a raincoat for rainy weather. Sanomaru's birthday is on February 25th and the day marks the annual Sanomaru's Day event called *Gotōchi Guru-Kyara Daisakusen.* (Sano City Brand Promotion Office 2017.) The event's name translates roughly as "regional gourmet character grand campaign", and as the name suggests the even focuses on regional gourmet brought to Sano by Sanomaru's mascot friends.

Sanomaru is an active member of the local Sano community. Sanomaru Supporters-club was founded in 2015 combining both the previously introduced Furusato Tax-system for private members and a special membership for businesses and associations. For businesses and associations, the membership includes Sanomaru's endorsement, character goods, appearances and more. (Sano City 2019c.) He's also part of the rebuilding campaign *Genki Na Sano He*, *Sano-shi Fukkō Purojekuto* ("toward a happier and healthier Sano, Sano city revival project"), an aid effort to provide relief after the destruction wreaked by typhoon 19 in 2019 (Sano City 2019a). In 2013 Sanomaru got his own specialty shop called *Sanomaru No Ie*, "Sanomaru's House" that sells Sanomaru goods and gives out information on local tourism and brands (Sano City 2020). "Home" in name of the shop carries a warm connotation of home. Sanomaru's House is also used as a venue for different seasonal celebrations like Christmas and Halloween. Additionally, the character receives and sends annual year-end cards.

In 2014 a group called *Yuru-tō* (ゆる党) that consists of Sanomaru and his best friends was formed to promote their respective areas in unison (Sano City 2019d). Sanomaru appears to be especially good friends with one of the members, Fukka-chan who works as the image character of Fukaya City[6]. The adventures of Yuru-tō are well recorded in both Sanomaru's YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTkWieSO74z0kn7q3cdba9w) and Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/sanomaru0225/) accounts. The team celebrates holidays, attends events and has meetings together. Other adventures of the team show them going to school or visiting hot springs together.

The rest of the content on Sanomaru's Instagram account mostly overlaps with the content of his Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/sanomaru20110225/), with the exception of there being more situational and carefree short videos on Instagram. Sanomaru's reach is better on Instagram with 18,400 followers compared to the 4,400 followers on Facebook. To suit the more visually inclined platform, Sanomaru's Instagram stories lead with colorful pictures, followed by text and hashtags which are usually toned-down and informational, with a few

[6] For more information on Fukka-chan, see https://www.fukkachan.com/.

references to whatever may be trending at the time. The content mostly consists of events, going to cafes, playing with other mascots, eating strawberries and enjoying the nature and the seasons. Sano's PR team has kept the tone of the posts light and fun: in the content Sanomaru is depicted childlike and cheerful, often moving his body quite rigorously despite of its awkward size. As mentioned earlier, the content on Facebook and Instagram overlap when it comes to videos and pictures, but on Facebook the posts are often accompanied by an informative yet fun text with helpful links.

There are two YouTube accounts with content about Sanomaru: The Sano PR-TV (https://www.youtube.com/user/SANOPRTV/) and Sanomaru's own account. Sano PR-TV has posted several videos on YouTube introducing Sanomaru and depicting him interacting with people, visiting places and engaging in various activities such as jumping rope with school children and playing cricket with a sports team. The account also has several more clearly promotional videos concentrating on different aspects of Sano, such as nature and cuisine as introduced by Sanomaru. While the Sano PR-TV takes a more conventional stance to audiovisual tourism promotion with calm imagery and narrated information, Sanomaru's own YouTube account has more colorful content. The account is followed by 1,470 users which would suggest that the content is mostly consumed locally. The video library is dominated by a video series titled *Zenryoku Sanomaru* (Full-power Sanomaru), where Sanomaru is depicted silently running through various sightseeing spots and popular places in the Sano area while informative subtitles run on the bottom (Sanomaru n.d.). The combination of cute with local information plays out comically as the camera follows a huge, awkward mascot running on full throttle through scenic routes. Most of the other video content on the account depicts Sanomaru visiting local sights and businesses and engaging in activities such as enjoying nature (cherry blossoms, fall colors, fields), eating local foods, fishing and playing sports and games. One of the introductory pieces, *Sano-shi Wo Osusume,* depicts Sanomaru going around different restaurants and eating many of the area's local specialties. Once Sanomaru is full, he goes to a scenic spot for a nap and dreams about different locations and cultural activities in Sano. The introduction ends with Sanomaru's character song – a sing-along piece in the traditional folk style called *ondō.* On the video Sanomaru dances on top of a lifted stage while dancers dressed in festival clothing perform *bon-odori* (a folk dance commonly performed during the Obon-festival) around him. The lyrics incorporate many local events, products and scenery while also articulating Sanomaru's prowess as an image character. As Sanomaru continues dancing with his group, the day progresses and the sun sets, with the festival-like video ending in a fireworks display above the local mountain scene behind Sanomaru. (Sanomaru 2015.)

Sanomaru has also notably collaborated with the Tochigi-born rap artist, DOTAMA in a song for Sano city PR, *My City*. In the lyrics DOTAMA sings about the importance of people from home and how the thoughts of *kokyō*, hometown are always with him on his travels. As a mute character, Sanomaru does not have much to do with the lyrics or performance of the song, but he does appear together with DOTAMA on the song's music video. In the video, DOTAMA is seen arriving to Sano city for a PR project with the city officials and Sanomaru. Sanomaru is visibly excited about the project, and the pair soon embark on a tour of Sano city, its scenic spots and cuisine. DOTAMA is then shown training Sanomaru for his future PR endeavors. DOTAMA is also shown enjoying the city and especially the shrines on his own. After the hard training, Sanomaru's PR activities seem to go much smoother. (Sanomaru 2018.)

The social media account with the best reach for Sanomaru is his Twitter account with 33,000 followers. Sanomaru's Twitter account (https://twitter.com/sanomaru225) is very active and most up to date with information about current events and promotions regarding local goods. The posts often contain a short video clip for entertainment and some text for information, and most of these seem to be sent from Sanomaru's House. Posts are often written in "Sanomaru's voice" and he regularly wishes his followers good morning and good night. Sanomaru and other mascots follow each other's accounts and communicate regularly via the platform.

Sanomaru's blog connected to his official website is also quite frequently updated. The posts contain more information than the other platforms, with advertisements about future outings and reports on past events, local or abroad. Many of the reports have to do with visiting other mascots and attending their events, or doing PR in festivals and brand fares such as the Furusato Festival in Tokyo. In the blog posts Sanomaru refers to Sano as *furusato* and is often depicted enjoying the sights and services of Sano and celebrating seasonal holidays with the local people. As with the other platforms, Sanomaru's blog also offers some nonsensical and disconnected content seemingly posted for image creation purposes or entertainment. (CyberAgent 2020.)

In the Yuru Kyara Grand Prix contest Sanomaru ranked 20th in 2011 and 4th in 2012, indicating a steady rise in popularity. The character's success peaked in 2013, when Sanomaru won the contest over roughly 1600 other contesting characters, after which he has participated as an ambassador. (Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix Implementation Committee 2020.)

5.3 Gunma-chan from Gunma

Gunma-chan won the Yuru-kyara Grand Prix in 2014 and ranked in the top five as third in 2013 and 2012. In 2011 Gunma-chan's ranking was 18th, which means that the character started amassing considerable popularity in 2012. (Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix Implementation Committee 2020.) According to Gunma-chan's official profile, the character was originally created in 1994 as a mascot for a sports event in Gunma and only got repurposed for Gunma prefecture public relations in 2008. The character is reported to be a 7-year-old pony with a birthday on April 22nd. Gunma-chan's special skill is transformation which the character uses for good PR for Gunma prefecture. (Gunma Prefecture Public Relations Department 2020.) The profile and all other official channels leave Gunma-chan's gender unspecified. However, the suffix -chan after the character's name is often used for girls and young children and is used to express endearment. The character is mostly seen using gender-neutral clothing, but sometimes the mascot is clad in unmistakably feminine costumes (e.g. princess dresses). Instead of using the gender-neutral pronoun they, I will be referring to Gunma-chan as male from here on[7]. The character's outer appearance is that of a plump, bipedal pony. The fur is light brown with an orange hue and the mane, tail and fringe are of a darker shade of brown. Gunma-chan has upright ears and white hands, feet and snout. He has a red button nose and black, small eyes. Gunma-chan is most often clad in a green baseball cap and a matching vest with the image of Gunma prefecture on the back.

Gunma-chan is very visible on Gunma prefecture's official website and several of the subsites it directs to. The official Gunma Prefecture website even has a button you can click to turn everything on the website even more full of Gunma-chan. The character is used for various soft power functions advising current and future residents of Gunma prefecture about everyday life and administration. As seems to be the norm with regional mascots, the character's image has also been utilized to promote the Furusato Tax System (Gunma Prefecture 2020a). In this case the involvement is limited to Gunma-chan's logo, but as the mascot can be found behind almost any link on the Gunma prefecture website, it is also present in some manner on almost all the channels selling regional produce.

[7] The selection reflects no bias from the author and is made in order to avoid unnecessarily complicated passages. Moving forward, the reader should bear in mind that despite the male pronoun used here, the character is genderless.

Gunma-chan's public relations strategy differs from the previous two campaigns covered in this paper. Gunma-chan has his own website titled *Gunma-chan Nabi*[8], but there is no blog. The site directs visitors to Gunma-chan's Facebook profile and not much else. Under the link for "Gunma-chan Dance", the YouTube video for the campaign's signature song and dance that is often played in the background of promotional videos. Through here, the site provides a less obvious route to *Gunma Channeru*, Gunma-chan's official YouTube channel. Unlike the two previous mascots introduced here, Gunma-chan has no official Twitter or Instagram account. Instead, the Gunma prefecture showroom in Ginza called *Gunma-chan Chi (*ぐんまちゃん家, "Gunma-chan's House", with house here having the same warm connotation of home as with Sanomaru's House*)* has accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Gunma Prefecture 2020b). The showroom's accounts are used to communicate content about Gunma-chan, albeit with a slightly different strategy than the official accounts of his mascot peers.

The most visible difference with the previously observed campaigns is that the showroom accounts post content using the staff's voice instead of Gunma-chan himself. The Facebook account (https://www.facebook.com/gunmachanchi.official/) communicates in a strictly commercial way about products, campaigns and events. Gunma-chan's likeness is used in the imagery but mostly his presence is marginal. To contrast the businesslike communication, the showroom's Twitter (https://twitter.com/ginfo3) and Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/gunmachan_chi/) accounts have taken a different approach. Both accounts post content with the staff's voice, but the tone of voice is much more familiar and Gunma-chan is raised to the forefront. The content of these two accounts mostly overlap, but the gap between reach is sizeable: the Instagram account has some 3,600 followers while the Twitter account is followed by 19,900 people. Once again, despite of the overlap the platforms present the content in very different ways with Twitter relying more on textual communication. Due to the considerable amount of overlap, I will leave the Twitter account with less coverage here and introduce the Instagram account.

The content on the Instagram account naturally promotes the products and campaigns of the showroom, but a large part of the content appears to be produced for entertainment and image creation purposes. In a video series titled *Gunma-chan Ga Chōsen Shitemitara*

[8] See http://www.gunmachan-navi.pref.gunma.jp/.

(ぐんまちゃんが挑戦してみたら "Gunma-chan Takes on a Challenge"), the followers and customers are invited to think of activities they would like the mascot to try out, which are then filmed by the showroom staff. The activities include things such as helping out at the shop, playing games, and doing exercise. The activity that stands out here is playing *karuta*, a traditional Japanese poem-based card game. In addition to this, the showroom has thrown a good number of different contests that allow them to affect how Gunma-chan presents himself by designing new attire for the character, for example. The showroom staff has certainly embraced Gunma-chan's special skill of transformation, as the character is seen in numerous different outfits for every occasion ranging from a firefighting uniform to an ancient Japanese costume. The showroom is very active in throwing promotional events for Gunma culture and products, all diligently advertised and documented on the Instagram account. Still, some of the events seem to be thrown for image creation purposes: the shop is sometimes visited by Gunma-chan's friends (i.e. other mascots), and the events are most usually turned into joint meet-and-greets. Outside of these events, customers are able to meet Gunma-chan at the showroom on most days of the week, and the posts refer to the mascot's other engagements outside of the shop (such as the Furusato Festival) as "working outside."

Gunma-chan's official YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/gunmakikaku) offers an abundance of material created as straightforward advertisement for the tourism industry. At the time of writing, the channel had 3,000 followers. One of the first things a visitor is greeted by is the Gunma dance, which is a fast-paced, cheerful song with a matching dance. In the official video, Gunma-chan dances to the song with two girls while karaoke subtitles scroll on the bottom and scenery from Gunma plays in the background. The lyrics talk about how lovely Gunma-chan is, the nature of Gunma prefecture and how the people there are important to each other. In the chorus, the lyrics prompt the listener to dance and sing about how Gunma is for everyone. (Gunma Channeru 2013.) The catchy song is utilized further on the channel by having different groups of people dance to the tune and by adding it as the soundtrack for introductory videos.

Another notable part of the campaign on YouTube are the *Gunma ga Ichiban* videos (originally made in 2014, revised in 2019), which have been posted on the channel in Japanese, English, Chinese and Portugese. In every language, the video can be watched as a longer 13-minute version or a short 3-minute version. The longer video takes its time introducing different things about Gunma that are number one (*ichiban*). The video is accompanied by an atmospheric soundtrack and a gentle female voice educating the viewer

about the sights that are being shown. Gunma-chan is also present at the video, introducing the viewer to different sights with a female companion. The things that are noted to be number one about Gunma on the video are nature, hot springs and industry (with stress on farming, cuisine silk and traditional arts). The video finishes with Gunma-chan leading a crowd of local people in the Gunma dance in front of the Gunma prefectural office, while a montage of more action-packed activities available in Gunma stream in the background. The shorter version of *Gunma ga Ichiban* is a condensed version of all the imagery shown on the longer version, with the soundtrack of *Minna no Gunma*. (Gunma Channeru 2019.)

On a completely different note, a video series titled *Gunma-chan Ga Shōkai Suru Jōmō Karuta* (ぐんまちゃんが紹介する上毛かるた, "Jōmo Karuta Introduced by Gunma-chan") boasts 20 videos on the official YouTube channel. In the series, Gunma-chan goes through the deck card by card, introducing each one to the viewer via subtitles and to a calming, synthesized music and imagery related to the card. The cards all have either to do with a person, a place, a local product or activity. (Gunma Channeru 2017.) The deck represents an impressive compilation of cultural treasures of Gunma. According to the Gunma prefecture Official Website, *Jōmō Karuta* was originally created in 1947 to bring light to the lives of young people of the region in the dark and poor years after World War Two. The deck has later come to be a pillar of Gunma culture. (Gunma Prefecture 2013.)

5.4 Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun from Shizuoka

Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun (出世大名家康くん) was created as a commemorative mascot for the city of Hamamatsu, Shizuoka for the 100th anniversary of its founding in 2011. In his profile, Ieyasu-kun is introduced as the likely reincarnation of the great historical figure Ieyasu Tokugawa, the feudal lord who unified Japan and became Japan's first *shōgun* at the turn of the 17th century. Before that, Tokugawa ruled for 17 years at the Hamamatsu castle. The feat of unifying Japan earned Ieyasu Tokugawa the nickname *shusse daimyō* (出世大名), where *shusse* refers to success in life. (Hamamatsu City 2017a.) The PR campaign built around Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun embraces both the *daimyō* discourse and the concept of *shusse*. Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun is an easily approachable representation of the historical figure behind it. The character has human shape but with a large, round head. Ieyasu-kun has small black eyes

and a triangular moustache and beard framing a small, smiling mouth with rosy cheeks to finish. One of the character's attraction points is the topknot which is a Hamanako lake eel, a local delicacy. It is said that rubbing the eel topknot brings luck and success in life. The back of the character's head is framed with a greying slice of hair on the otherwise bald head. Ieyasu-kun is dressed in traditional clothing with a family crest that has the symbol of a clementine, another local specialty. The top of the garment is colored blue and green, the green representing the forests of Hamamatsu and the blue representing local bodies of water. The character wears a traditional hakama skirt with the pattern of a piano keyboard to represent the local, world renowned music instrument manufacturers Yamaha, Kawai and Roland. The feet peeking from under the hakama skirt are clad in red stockings, making the character a rather colorful sight. (Hamamatsu City 2014b.)

On most channels associated to him, Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun speaks with his own voice in text. During appearances the character is usually silent and being interpreted with a few exceptions of cases where he speaks aloud with a high, quirky voice. The character's communication has a distinct old-timey feel to it with a mix of local dialect and hints of an older version of the Japanese language. The character refers to himself as *sessha* (拙者), which is a humble way of referring to oneself and associated with the way samurai of old spoke. He also often ends phrases with *-noja* or *-nou*, which are suffixes with similar background but no special meaning. The character refers to other people with the suffix *-dono* that is a polite way of addressing either men or women and used to address nobility in older Japanese. Another notable aspect of the character's language is how he favors the term *shutsujin* (出陣, going into battle). He also uses the name Edo for Tokyo.

As mentioned earlier, the campaign built for Ieyasu-kun takes full advantage of the concept of *shusse.* In addition to getting a taste of *shusse* by touching the eel topknot, the character lives in the Hamamatsu castle, also dubbed the "Castle of Success" that was built and inhabited by Ieyasu Tokugawa (Entetsu Assist Co. Ltd. 2020). In 2012, the character departed on a nationwide tour with the purpose of distributing the *shusse* of Hamamatsu everywhere in Japan and of course, PR (Ieyasu-kun Nikki 2012). Since 2014, Ieyasu-kun has worked as the general promotions manager for the *Shusse Tabi Purojekuto* (Shusse Travels Project). The project was established to promote Hamamatsu as a "shusse power spot" for businesspeople. The project's visuals are painted in golden patina and boast a traditional look complete with the signature stamp of Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun. The project has defined certain foods, drinks, souvenirs and other cultural products as sources of good luck but with certain prerequisites, the most

important being locality. Also included in the project is a walking route through Hamamatsu's lucky spots and an office for Ieyasu-kun set up at the city office. (Hamamatsu City 2015.) The concept of *shusse* luck dominates almost every aspect of tourism materials released by the city. In addition to the character's work with the project as promotions manager, Ieyasu-kun was also appointed *fukushichō* (福市長, happiness mayor[9]) of Hamamatsu city in 2012, the duties of which he still performs (Hamamatsu City 2014c).

Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun won the Yuru-kyara Grand prix in 2015, ranked second in 2013 and seventh in 2012 (Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix Implementation Committee 2020). In 2014, Ieyasu-kun did not participate in the grand prix: he was engaged in a specifically designed part of his campaign, the groundwork for which had been laid before the grand prix of 2013. Utilizing the samurai imagery, Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun announced his participation in the 2013 Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix with a grand ceremony and press conference that was called *Tenka Tōitsu No Michi: Shutsujin Shiki* (天下統一の道: 出陣式, Road to unification: Ceremony for departure to battle). In the event he visited Zōjōji temple to pray for victory, after which he read aloud a document called Declaration of Unity at the press conference. The declaration included his intention to cut off his topknot and embrace priesthood if he failed to be victorious. (Ieyasu-kun Nikki 2013a.) *Tenka Tōitsu No Michi* was adopted as the name of the campaign to win the competition, and many of the PR activities in the voting period were labelled as part of the campaign. An example of these activities is a video series titled as *Tenka Tōitsu Kassen* (天下統一合戦, Battle for unification) that was published on Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's YouTube account in 2013. In the series, Ieyasu-kun is depicted as embarking on three separate battles to establish the superiority of Hamamatsu's selling points against others: the local specialty eel, lake Hamanako and Hamamatsu jazz. (Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun n.d.) Despite these efforts, as mentioned earlier, Ieyasu-kun was not victorious that year and was indeed forced to cut off his eel topknot and enter priesthood in another ceremony and press conference in late 2013 (Hamamatsu City 2013). With hopes of recovering his *shusse* power, he engaged in ascetic Buddhist practices in the late 2013 and early 2014 (Ieyasu-kun Nikki 2013b, 2014a, 2014b & Hamamatsu City 2014a). The efforts seemed to have paid off rather quickly, since the character was depicted as being granted his topknot back by the goddess Kannon only a few weeks later (Ieyasu-kun Nikki 2014c). In the August of 2014 it was

[9] The job title is a pun from the identically pronounced word 副市長, meaning assistant mayor or vice mayor.

announced that Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun would not be participating in the Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix of that year as a competitor but as an ambassador (Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix Implementation Committee 2014).

In addition to the videos on Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's own YouTube account, there is also an abundance of content available featuring the character on the YouTube account HamamatsuChannel. Most of the videos appear to be episodes of various tv-shows that had been broadcast locally, such as the *Hamamatsu Naruhodo Akademii*, where Ieyasu-kun occasionally appears to join the hosts in introducing different aspects of Hamamatsu (HamamatsuChannel n.d.). The channel posted an official, 3-parted promotion video for Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun in 2013. The video opens with the character leaving the Hamamatsu castle and going around town visiting sights to a soundtrack of choir music. Ieyasu-kun returns to the castle, after which his theme song starts. After opening with the sound of a war horn, the song starts as fast paced and cheery, with Ieyasu-kun dancing to it in a sand field with a view of the Hamamatsu castle. The song has a slower rap-part in the middle that's accompanied by a darker discotheque visuals. The lyrics describe Ieyasu-kun's appearance and his job as the *fukushichō* of Hamamatsu city. The rap part finishes with an encouragement: "*Genki ni surunda Hamamatsu wo, chikara wo awasete yaramaika*[10]", which translates roughly to "let's all work together and make Hamamatsu prosperous". The song finishes with a repeat of the fast-paced part. In the third part of the video Ieyasu-kun is seen going to school to join a class of grade school students in a comedy style story. The children wonder about the meaning of Shusse Daimyō, which is when a boy in the back row jumps up to explain the concept. The teacher talks about Ieyasu-kun's appearance and touches his topknot, which transforms him into a successful-looking, well-dressed man. Throughout the scene, Ieyasu-kun is jittery, excited and silent. (HamamatsuChannel 2013.) Another series of videos, *Risaachi! Hamamatsu,* features Ieyasu-kun's theme song with montages of visiting places and events, people waving, dancing, singing and so on (HamamatsuChannel n.d.). In 2015 Hamamatsu Channel published a video titled *Hamamatsu Shusse Ondō*, which is a promotional song and dance combination made for Ieyasu-kun for the 2015 Yuru Kyara® Grand Prix. The video features Ieyasu-kun dancing to the traditional-style ondō song with the townspeople, many of them clad in samurai gear, yukata, or other festival clothing. The lyrics talk about the specialty foods of the town, scenic local

[10] *Yaramaika* is the local dialect's version of *yaranaika* (let's give it a try). It represents the way the local people embrace challenges. (Hamamatsu Visitors and Convention Bureau n.d.) The phrase is also widely utilized in the public relations campaigns of Hamamatsu City.

places, music and the overflowing *shusse* of Hamamatsu and its happiness it brings on all aspects of life. The song is interrupted a few times by Ieyasu-kun shouting encouragement to dance, and the chorus is a rising chant repeating the word *shusse.* The visuals move along with the lyrics showing scenes adjacent to theme the lyrics have to do with. The townspeople keep on dancing throughout the video, even if Ieyasu-kun himself takes a break every now and then to enjoy the scenery. (HamamatsuChannel 2015.)

As for Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's social media presence, the character is not a very active user of his accounts. The only account that seems to be active is his Twitter account (https://twitter.com/ieyasukun100) that has 15,400 followers. There he tweets content with his own voice, documenting events and weekly appearances at the Hamamatsu castle. A good portion of the content has to do with Ieyasu-kun interacting with other mascots, either at Hamamatsu or at other events his mascot friends have invited him to. Ieyasu-kun's official Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/ieyasukun) has mostly similar content as the Twitter account, but it only has slightly over 7,000 followers. Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's blog at Hamazo has not been active since 2015, but the information about the character's achievements and activities is still available for browsing. The character's official website was closed on December 31st of 2019 (Hamamatsu City 2019). Part of the inactivity may be explained by the appearance of a new city mascot in 2016, Shusse Hōshi Naotora-chan, with whom Ieyasu-kun has worked side by side ever since (Hamamatsu City 2017b).

6. Analysis

The aim of the analysis is to identify nostalgic triggers in regional mascots in connection to *furusato* imagery, *amae* and the imagined past, utilizing the material previously introduced. Additionally, the viewpoint of cute culture associations with childhood and nostalgia through a different, though related imagery offers another gateway for nostalgic triggers to manifest. I will also be looking for aspects that contribute to simulated worlds where *amae* and affective consumption become possible through immersion in the campaigns.

When considering regional mascots as representations of nostalgic imagery, some of the meanings derived in association to them are more denotative in nature and some are found on the less obvious, connotative level. The cultural context, concepts of tradition and the imagery linked to the homeplace in the imagined past introduced earlier serve as the signifying system through which these connotative links can be found. The aim of this analysis is to recognize the triggers for nostalgic emotions arising from the cultural identity and context of Japan. As the

mascots in question are all regional, it could be assumed that any nostalgic feeling arising from them would be somehow connected to the place they represent. This, however, is not the case. Mascots can evoke personal memories entirely separate from the signifying system connected to *furusato.* Still, as has been shown through studies introduced earlier in this paper, any nostalgia and especially personal nostalgia in advertising results in greater consumer involvement for the product. It should be noted that even though these connections for nostalgia can be made, not all of them work in the same way for all who perceive them: nostalgia is ultimately a reaction in connection to personal experiences and the sense of belonging in the Japanese context.

6.1 Shinjō-kun

I start the analysis of the chosen regional mascots with Shinjō-kun, the character with the most youthful campaign of the four. Indeed, Shinjō-kun's campaign relies heavily on social media and has embraced many of its trends, making connections to *furusato* few and far between. Still, parts of the character's campaign can be connected to *furusato* imagery.

In line with the design standards for regional mascots, Shinjō-kun's outer appearance reflects cute culture and can be described as *kawaii*. The plump and big-eyed appearance of the character makes it possible for consumers to experience transference, i.e. reflect their feelings to it due to a sense of familiarity. Shinjō-kun's design also utilizes the local specialty nabeyaki ramen, which may serve as a nostalgic trigger to people with personal memories of the dish or by serving as a reminder of a similar dish in one's on personal history. Shinjō-kun is one of the two characters included in the analysis that has a defined age: five years or so. The age would indicate childlike mannerism and interests, which the character does exhibit at times with excited behavior towards games, pranks and trying new things. This may serve as a nostalgic trigger by allowing consumers to reflect on their own childhood and escape to it momentarily. Still, in the content available on the character's social media accounts, many of the activities he engages in are out of the scope of regular five-year-olds. The character's career as a DJ and e-athlete represent one of the more youth-oriented activities. It is possible to feel nostalgic about these things, but as this paper focuses on imagery of *furusato* and manifestations of *amae* as triggers for nostalgia, relevant references are not abundant. It should be noted that although the character's social media channels tend to favor a more contemporary approach to image creation, advertisements of local products, events and sights are still present, although slightly drowned out in the abundance of other material.

Aside from the more youthful content on Shinjō-kun's social media, the character's blog offers a more traditional peek into the character's campaign. The character's backstory unravels in hundreds of posts that each are entertaining stories from Shinjō-kun's adventures. As the backstory builds, the character is provided with a growing number of biographical details that contribute to the sense of reality, which makes it possible for willing consumers to enter a simulated world. The stories often take place locally with Shinjō-river being a central spatial element. Many of the adventures have to do with enjoying the seasonal nature, enjoying festivals, hot springs and so on, which are powerful triggers for nostalgia in the Japanese cultural context. For local population, stories depicting visits to local sights may evoke personal nostalgia, but for the most part the nostalgia experienced through these stories is for a collective, imagined *furusato* and shared experiences of hometown. The blog also often refers to the Furusato Tax system and turns the stories into advertisements for local specialties, which similarly to nabeyaki ramen can act as nostalgic triggers and encourage consumers to engage with the region as their hometown, either imagined or real.

Another potent trigger for nostalgia in Shinjō-kun's campaign is the festival culture. The Yosakoi Dance festival is very visible in the character's posts and activities. As the yosakoi dance style with the traditional *naruko* is observed in festivals throughout Japan, its popularity is no wonder. Since the festival dance spread to Japan from Kōchi, the prefecture could be seen as the *furusato* of yosakoi. A large gathering celebrating this particular part of Japanese festival culture works as a nostalgic trigger, although the music of the performances is sometimes updated to please a more contemporary audience. Even further dating the dance style, the *naruko* clappers are a definite part of the *furusato* imagery and may instill collective or historical nostalgia. On a different note, the Gotōchi Kyara Festival in Susaki represents another gateway to reminiscing. The festival revolves around regional characters that are labelled as Shinjō-kun's friends. This creates the image of a network of characters that exist, communicate and operate in a fantasy realm of their own. Still, as the event brings the characters into the physical world, this realm becomes accessible to consumers. As previously discussed, immersion into a fantasy world filled with cute characters provides an ideal way to escape the pressures of life and indulge in play-acting in one's own childhood.

6.2 Sanomaru

Sanomaru's character capitalizes on the local Sano castle and the samurai imagery. The samurai connections point to a slightly older era than the popular *furusato* images. Still, they are possible triggers for historical nostalgia, even though the nature of the nostalgia may not be as affective. Sanomaru's character represents samurai warriors and the historical era they belong to through soft metaphors about samurai swords and clothing, creating a friendly image of a protective warrior from the days past residing in the town. As noted earlier, historical nostalgia as a more general and personally detached variety of nostalgia is a safe option for advertisers attempting to tap into the positive images created through nostalgia. In Sanomaru's case, the metaphoric reference to samurai culture serves as an interesting tidbit of the town's history, but doesn't build toward an image of home place or provoke affective nostalgia toward a place. This connection can however evoke a more general nostalgic reaction toward a historical time.

Sanomaru’s design follows the popular norms of cute culture in its points of appeal. The design together with the character’s childlike conduct creates a sense of the character being very young, which may evoke a sense of *amae* in the consumer (in this case, as the caregiver). As discussed earlier, cute characters allow for consumers to both indulge and be indulged. Sanomaru has plenty of mascot friends and his communication with them creates the illusion of the character being an intelligent, independent entity. Aside from this, the campaign does not provide too many biographical details for the character, which leaves the sense of reality somewhat lacking in this sense. Still, interaction with Sanomaru goods makes it possible for consumers to enter a simulated world and escape to their childhood. Despite the lack of biographical details, Sanomaru’s presence on social media fortifies the feel of agency for the character. In fact, in Sanomaru’s case, the most prominent trigger for a nostalgia-enabling sense of reality is the way the character is depicted as a friend, a family member and an active part of the community who invites the consumer to join his world. The Sano rebuilding campaign, Sanomaru’s House and the way the character takes part in seasonal celebrations with the community makes it possible for receptive consumers to feel effortless artificial closeness.

The references to local specialty noodles and fried potatoes embody the area's food culture, which can evoke nostalgia for people familiar with these products directly or through similar products from their own consumption history. Sanomaru's involvement with the Furusato Tax system connects the local specialty products of Sano denotatively to *furusato* imagery, depicting the products as deriving from tradition: in this way, people who do not have a personal connection to the area of origin for these products recognize them nevertheless as traditional

and significant to the area through the action of aiding the producers. The action of helping the producers through this program creates a link between the consumer and the imagined community. Notably, this also holds true for the other three mascots and their activities in relation to the promotion system. In addition to the Furusato Tax system, Sanomaru Supporters-club allows for individual consumers to band together as an imagined community with a shared purpose. In a more active manifestation of PR, the Sanomaru's Day event and the character's participation to festivals like the Furusato Festival market the local cuisine as the taste of *furusato* while sharing the stage with others as well.

Some of the most potent nostalgic triggers in Sanomaru's campaign can be found in the video content, such as the previously introduced *Sano-shi Wo Osusume*. The way Sanomaru indulges in local cuisine in the video can effectively evoke a sense of near envy in the viewer (it did for the author). As Sanomaru takes a nap in a childlike manner, the dreams he is depicted as seeing in the video paint Sano as a nurturing, beautiful and tranquil place: the montage in no uncertain terms reflects Sanomaru's love for Sano. The scene makes it appear that Sanomaru is extremely comfortable and safe in his surrounding home scenery. The character song that follows continues in line with this representation of *furusato*. While the song talks about the local scenery and events with the backdrop of a festival, the sing-along factor of the performance invites viewers to join in the lyrics and through them, the message of affection toward Sano. The *bon-odori* dance, the *ondō* style of singing and the final fireworks display all further contribute to this connection between Sanomaru and collective festivities of Sano. Thus, Sanomaru's promotion video creates a distinct sense of Sano as a welcoming home place, and acts as a trigger of nostalgia through this imagery. Another video filled with *furusato* imagery is the music video *My City.* As the lyrics very denotatively describe Sano as *furusato*, the more connotative message of community in connection to Sanomaru can be seen in the visuals. DOTAMA is shown as embracing Sanomaru as another member of the community and training him on how to properly express his love for Sano. Not only that, but the lyrics are paired with nostalgic visuals of shrines and nature, both potent reminders of *furusato* in this case. Representing a slightly more lighthearted and less emotionally loaded video content, the *Zenryoku Sanomaru* videos also provide visuals of local sights that can possibly serve as nostalgic triggers. However, the videos are repetitive and have no soundtrack to strengthen any possible affective experience.

6.3 Gunma-chan

As the oldest mascot under analysis here, Gunma-chan provides an interesting new perspective on mascot culture through the lens of nostalgia. As the mascot was originally created in 1994 (albeit with a different name), the children who were introduced to the character in the nineties would now be adult or adolescent consumers. This aspect makes it possible for the mascot itself to be the object of personal nostalgia, which is quite rare for regional mascots due to the trend being rather new. A mascot character may have also been present in life for consumers during times of discontinuity, which would make first-time nostalgia possible. In addition to enabling mechanisms of personal nostalgia, longing for a historical past of which Gunma-chan was part of is possible. For example, people who later in life move to Gunma can through the character long for having been a part of the region's population earlier. As the design of the character has changed very little since 1994, the style of the character isn't very contemporary. This serves as another nostalgic charm point: the design itself is a reminder of an older time and may appeal to older consumers better than its more contemporary peers. Whether a conscious choice or not, not updating the character is a sensible tactic when it comes to advertisement appeal.

Gunma-chan's design, even if not very contemporary, utilizes similar elements from cute culture as newer mascots, e.g. plumpness and clumsiness. That being said, although the character can be considered cute in today's standards, it may not appeal as well to trend-conscious consumers. Despite of the design, the character's popularity appears to stand on a steady footing, and its victory in the 2014 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix indicates a good reception even in the 21st century. Additionally, the campaign has found a way to circumvent the design problem by allowing consumers to have a say in the character's clothing, utilizing the character's special power of transformation. Seasonal celebrations are also reflected in the appearance of the character, creating a sense of the character being a part of the community.

Interestingly, Gunma-chan's home does not appear to be in Gunma. The campaign includes the showroom that is branded as Gunma-chan's home in Tokyo's Ginza, which goes against any connotations of Gunma as the character's *furusato.* However, the showroom does promote everything Gunma, which creates an image of the showroom being a portal into the prefecture, so to speak. For former residents of the prefecture the showroom may indeed serve as a portal to their original hometowns, offering consumers a way to indulge themselves in their hometown flavors and goods and to wallow in nostalgia. For people seeking an imagined community, the showroom offers a way to get to know the region without investing in travel. Nostalgia may be evoked here through memories connected to similar products from one's personal past or

through the generalized imagery of hometown with its traditional crafts and flavors. Even if the showroom physically resides in Tokyo, home is still heavily connected to Gunma. Additionally, the visits from Gunma-chan's mascot friends reinforce the simulated reality of the character world, which makes affective and nostalgic experiences more likely. Another example of Gunma-chan's campaign promoting flavors of *furusato* is the character's involvement in the Furusato Tax system and participation to the Furusato Festival with his mascot peers.

Gunma-chan's character song has nostalgic triggers in both the lyrics and the visuals. The lyrics stress the appeal of local nature, the inviting community and the charm of Gunma-chan himself. Since the music is utilized in plenty of the content on Gunma-chan's YouTube channel, it lends its affective effect to all the videos. Especially the videos depicting different groups of people from Gunma dancing and singing to the song create a sense of an inviting community joined by the character and love for Gunma. As the lyrics of the song encourage to dance and refer to Gunma as everyone's with no parties excluded, it also functions as an effective invitation to enjoy the region with the community. Even more potent, audiovisual nostalgic triggers can be seen on the *Gunma Ga Ichiban* videos. The visuals of the videos are ripe with *furusato* scenery and traditional cuisine, crafts and activities such as hot springs and shrine visits. All of these are in no way intrinsic to the Gunma prefecture alone, which enables viewers to experience collective nostalgia towards homeplace (yearning for the past of a specific culture). Combined with the soothing soundtrack, the feel of the videos is warm and inviting, painting Gunma as a nurturing place to live and enjoy.

Gunma-chan's age is perpetually seven, which would put the character in the same age group as grade school students. In the content available for the character, his demeanor is mostly calm and collected, which differs from other mascots in this study. However, the suffix -chan in the character's name indicates that the mascot is indeed to be perceived as a child, even if his conduct is not particularly childlike. The video series *Gunma-chan Ga Shōkai Suru Jōmō Karuta* is an excellent example of the character's more mature conduct. In all of the videos, Gunma-chan is dressed appropriately for each of the cards and introduces the themes via subtitles in a very collected, respectful and somber manner. As the themes of the cards reflect proud points of the area's culture with connections to tradition at every turn, the videos represent a respectful way of providing viewers with material to feel nostalgic about. Again, although this time several of the themes introduced on the videos indeed have their origins in the Gunma prefecture, many of the items presented are observed elsewhere in Japan as well. In a sense, traditional themes that have their roots in the prefecture create the image of Gunma being the *furusato* of said subjects. All in all, combined with an older style of music, the video series

provides powerful triggers for collective and historical nostalgia. Naturally, for viewers familiar with the imagery it provides triggers for personal nostalgia as well.

6.4 Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun

I finish my analysis with Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun, the character with possibly the most comprehensive campaign out of the four. The campaign relies heavily on samurai imagery and the fame of Ieyasu Tokugawa, resulting in the nostalgic triggers of the campaign being mostly historical. Samurai imagery was also utilized in the campaign of Sanomaru, but it should be noted that the references there are far softer than the ones observed here. From place of residence to outer appearance and participation in the Yuru Kyara Grand Prix, every aspect of the character and his campaign utilizes samurai culture in an all-encompassing way. Even the language he uses is brandished with local dialect and old, formal Japanese. Here, the use of local dialect can evoke experiences of personal nostalgia. The campaign depicts Hamamatsu as a city where the samurai culture is still very much embraced, enjoyed and utilized for celebrations and sights. The visuals of the separate yet related campaign *Shusse Tabi Purojekuto* with their golden patina are similarly designed to create an official, historical feel for the campaign. Despite of the formal look of the campaign, it actually connects locality with good luck in a tongue-in-cheek manner, raising local specialties onto a pedestal. This part of the campaign can be connected to *furusato* imagery and considered as a nostalgic trigger on the part of the traditional local goods and cuisine. Still, as every aspect of the campaign relies so heavily on historical imagery, triggers for personal nostalgia are for the large part not as prominent. Then again, the complex backstory and the character's complete immersion into his own samurai world build a simulated reality that can be accessed through affective consumption and utilized for experiences of *amae*.

While Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's outer appearance does reflect samurai culture, the character design still follows the norms of cute culture. The points of appeal have to do with Hamamatsu specialties and nature, which can be connotatively connected to *furusato* imagery. Distinct from other mascots introduced in this study, Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun is not a child nor does his outer appearance attempt to use any such elements. The character is depicted as an old man with greying hair: even though the character does act silly at times, his conduct would be better described as the excitedness of a confused old man rather than childlike. This kind of connotations can evoke feelings of *amae* but in the sense that consumers wish to protect and take care of the character.

Daimyō Ieyasu-kun's three-part promotion video does not provide too many opportunities for nostalgia to arise. The sights in the first part may enable nostalgia for homeplace. The character's theme song in the second part mostly only provides the single historical nostalgia trigger of Hamamatsu castle. In the third part, however, Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun attends school with grade school children, which can be a powerful trigger for personal nostalgia and through the connotations enabled by childhood, for yearning for homeplace. Similar school imagery can be observed on the *Hamamatsu Naruhodo Akademii*, which also provides ample information on the charm points of Hamamatsu, even if most of the time without the town's mascot involved. *Risaachi! Hamamatsu* also shows the mascot interacting with young children, creating a sense of community and providing a possible trigger for personal nostalgia.

The most triggers for *furusato*-related imagery and other nostalgic triggers can be observed on the video *Hamamatsu Shusse Ondō*. As already established earlier, the music style *ondō* is intimately connected to Japanese festival culture, traditions and thus functions as a trigger for hometown yearning. Festival culture is very visible on the video overall, with many of the local people participating dressed in yukata or *happi* (festival work clothes). Aside from the connotative links to *furusato* provided by the festival imagery and music, the video goes over many of the local specialty foods and sights, which can all evoke nostalgia in both its personal and collective strands. Naturally, the concept of *shusse* is very dominating in the *ondō.* However, as most of the *shusse* references in the character's campaign appear rather separate from any notion of *furusato*, this rendition of the city's *shusse* power manages to connect the concept with community and the happiness it brings to every aspect of life. For consumers who are looking for an imagined homeplace, traveling to the home of *shusse* or consuming products associated with its life-changing power may provide a way to join this imagined community and call it home.

7. Conclusions

The analysis confirmed my original hypothesis of the campaigns constructed around regional mascots utilizing nostalgic triggers through the representation process. Thus, regional mascots can be seen as capitalizing on the culturally bound landscape of nostalgia in Japan. As the constructionist approach to representations involves the element of constructing meanings and constituting reality, the representations discussed in this paper thus function as constituting locations as imagined native places and communities adoptable as one's own. This process of meaning making relies on the culturally shared nostalgic imagery of *furusato*, a native place or

hometown, which offers an imagined place of belonging through the simulation of community in contemporary Japan. Yearning for home place in the Japanese context constitutes as collective nostalgia. Through analysis, links between signs belonging to this sign system and the connotative references to *furusato* were established. It is noteworthy that the links observed here are largely connected to an emotional landscape instead of tangible associations between objects, events and actual memories.

Inside the discourse of longing in the Japanese cultural context, *furusato, amae*, cute culture and simulation all intertwine to create a unique setting enabling nostalgic experience for consumers and affective consumption of goods. In this paper I argued that simulation through cute culture provides ample possibilities for experiences of *amae* to manifest. In other words, immersion in a character world enables sensations of craving for escape and indulgence and consequently satisfying the needs for indulgent interdependence. *Amae* itself is often connected explicitly to childhood and experiences of being nurtured. This aspect of the phenomenon provides another gateway for nostalgic experiences and yearning for home to arise, which in turn contributes to the affective effect regional mascot campaigns produce in connection to place branding. Character worlds and consumption of character goods also make experiences of comfort or *iyashi* possible. Furthermore, identification with an imagined community of a hometown satisfies a need for interdependence and indulgence. Regional mascots that advertise their respective areas through public relations increase the visibility of their areas as a vacation destination that can possibly satisfy these needs.

The strongest nostalgic triggers identified through the analysis were found to be those of collective nature, i.e. connotations that can be identified with throughout Japan and connected to notions of tradition and home. One especially potent and often observed trigger in the mascot campaigns was the festival culture. Even as there are regional differences in the theme of the festivals, many triggers can be generalized to become representations of the festival tradition as a whole. This was found to be the case for other cultural products and traditions as well. Among other powerful triggers identified were nature, hot springs, nature, shrines, crafts and community celebrations.

Foodstuffs and traditional cuisine was another nostalgic trigger widely observed in the mascot campaigns. Food can serve as a trigger for personal nostalgia either through memories of the actual dish or similar ones in a person's own consumption history. Any foods that are articulated as having the taste of *furusato* and *shusse* in the case of Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun gain additional affective value from this connection. As food serves as a connecting force in life e.g. during festivals and other gatherings, shared admiration for locally recognized dishes can

contribute to a sense of belonging to an imagined community. All four mascots studied here promote the Furusato Tax system which makes it possible for consumers to show their support for local communities and in a sense, become part of them from afar. On similar lines, mascots campaigns create denotative links between local cuisine and *furusato* imagery by taking part in festivals such as the Furusato Festival, which focuses on festival culture and cuisine.

Reminders of childhood were another trigger for nostalgia, although this time personal. Childlike demeanor of mascots including playfulness, curiosity and adventurousness was identified through the imagery of *amae* as possible catalysts of nostalgic feelings and yearning for indulgence. Childlike behavior was observed as most pronounced during mascot gatherings where play is a dominant factor. Of the mascots studied here, Shinjō-kun and Sanomaru displayed distinctly childlike behavior, despite of Sanomaru not having a defined age. Although defined as a seven-year-old, Gunma-chan exhibited rather collected behavior. Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun on the other hand is depicted as an old man, the essence of which was still found capable of instilling sensations of *amae*. Furthermore, the outer appearance of mascot characters was found as a possible trigger for feelings of *amae* to arise: consumers can either wish to nurture the character itself or escape to their childhood to experience indulgence. In addition to childlike behavior, visual triggers of small children and school can evoke personal nostalgia.

The close relationships between mascot characters, their communities and consumers was found to be another factor in producing situations where simulation became possible. As the characters are depicted as parts of the community or even as close friends or family, it contributes to the sense of reality that enables immersion into the character world. As intelligent, communicating entities with their own social media accounts where communication between mascots becomes possible, the characters are attributed with even further realism. Similarly, either comprehensive biographical details or backstories contributing to the sense of reality were observed in the cases of three mascots: Shinjō-kun, Sanomaru and Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun.

The analysis revealed that regional mascots and their campaign imagery can act as triggers of historical nostalgia for a time before one's birth. For Sanomaru and Shusse Daimyō Ieyasu-kun this was deemed possible through images connected to historical figures, the samurai culture and historically significant buildings. Even as historical nostalgia can prove effective in producing higher emotional engagement in marketing, it does not connect to *furusato* imagery directly or evoke personal memories that might result in affective consumption. Interestingly, another aspect of nostalgic aspect in connection to mascot characters arose from the analysis. In the case of Gunma-chan, the actual age of the character was found old enough to be able to

instill personal nostalgia in some consumers. On another important note, nostalgia evoking images carry the risk of provoking negative feelings attributed to the sense of homelessness and loss. However, if the images successfully lead to a travel or consumption decision, the sense of loss can be erased through the simulation of the things being felt nostalgic about. The mascot campaigns studied here mostly incorporate cheerful and happy images in connection to nostalgic triggers, circumventing the negative effects. Still, as was observed in the case of Gunma-chan and the *jōmo karuta,* the mascots can also adopt a more serious and respective stance toward cultural treasures and tradition. All in all, the campaigns for regional mascot characters were found to be capable of instilling a wide range of nostalgic experiences, all of which are not tied to the *furusato* imagery or experiences of *amae.* That being said, large parts of the campaigns consist of content created for entertainment or image creation purposes. The case of Shinjō-kun illustrates well how regional mascots of today can also utilize a very contemporary, youthful tactic in their PR functions.

It should be noted that the analysis here was carried out from the viewpoint of the messages being directed at potential tourists and consumers instead of the natives of the region. Place branding requires a certain level of inner coherence and identity in a region's residents in order for the communication to be successful and coordinated. How these images build toward a place brand identity is thus a relevant research question worthy of exploration, but also one that escapes the scope of this study. Similarly, the administrative utilization of regional mascots contributing to regional coherence is a possible topic of further research. On a national level, the images of *furusato* capitalize on the pool of culturally shared agrarian history embodied by rural villages and towns. In a sense, the imagery appeals to and further constitutes the Japanese cultural identity.

Finally, it should be noted that even as this study shed some light on how the process of meaning making works in regional mascots and their campaigns, the actual occurrence of nostalgic reactions cannot be confirmed through the analysis of possible connotations. Thus, even if the campaigns are filled with nostalgia-evoking images, the outcome of nostalgic feeling is not guaranteed. The actuality of this causal relation is another potential and relevant topic for future research. Also, the qualitative approach of this study restricts the scope of the materials to a certain extent, with the mascots studied here representing only a small sample of the multitude of regional mascots in Japan. Further research is required to confirm the frequency of nostalgic triggers in Japanese regional mascots.

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